

## **Benedict's Dharma 2**

### **A Benedictine Experience - A Buddhist/Christian Dialogue**

[www.BenedictsDharma2.org](http://www.BenedictsDharma2.org)

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Kate Andrews - Rev. Kusala Bhikshu - Sister Mary Margaret Funk

**Benedict's Dharma 2...** Forty Episcopalian men and women from around the country gathered for this very special "Benedictine Experience" inspired by the book, "Benedict's Dharma," in historic [New Harmony, Indiana](#). Join Sister Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, executive director of MID ([Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue](#)), Kusala Bhikshu a Buddhist monk, and Mr. Karl Peterson a specialist in early Christian music as they guide participants through a week-long Benedictine Experience.

**In Benedict's Dharma the book**, a Zen priest Norman Fisher, meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein, professor Judith Simmer-Brown, and Yifa, a nun of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, flesh out The Rule of Saint Benedict, which has guided the organization and daily life of the Western Christian monastic tradition since the ninth century. Time after time, these Buddhists find in The Rule of Saint Benedict, which is included in its entirety, points that resonate with their own experiences--points such as an emphasis on reverence, a pragmatic mindset, and the need for hard work and practice.

[Sister Meg](#) and [Rev. Kusala](#) went through Benedict's Dharma chapter by chapter during this week long experience, adding their own Buddhist/Christian perspective.

Stenographer - Kate Andrews did the original transcript... It was edited by Rev. Kusala Bhikshu and Sister Mary Margaret Funk for clarity.

[Day 1](#) | [Day 2](#) | [Day 3](#) | [Day 4](#) | [Day 5](#)

[- Day One -](#)

Topics:

[Sister Meg](#) - The History of Benedict's Dharma the Book, History of the Rule of St. Benedict, The Spiritual Journey, Christian Renunciation and Practice.

[Rev. Kusala](#) - God, Soul, Heaven, Sin, The Eightfold Path, Relative and Ultimate Reality, Unity and Diversity.

[Q&A](#) - Levels of Dialogue, If someone breaks a Monastic Rule, IBMC and the Formless Rule, Monastic Accountability, Formless Practice, Goals.

[- Day Two -](#)

Topics:

[Sister Meg](#) - The Effects of Original Sin, The Art of Discernment, The Essence of Vigils, The Difference Between Therapy and Spirituality.

[Rev. Kusala](#) - What is Freedom, Is Ownership Real, Forgiveness and Acceptance, Patience.

[Q&A](#) - How Does a Catholic Die, How Does a Buddhist Die, The Difference Between Suicide and Dying in a State of Grace, A Visit to the Coroner's Office, Compassion and Loving-Kindness, Getting Ready for Death.

[- Day Three -](#)

## Topics:

[Sister Meg](#) - Monastic Way of Life, Community is Not Optional, Accountability and Obedience, Being Celibate.

[Rev. Kusala](#) - The five precepts, Buddhist Meditation, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness, and Not-Self.

[Q&A](#) - Extrasensory Perception, Balance and the Middle Way, Not-Self and Ego, Jesus Christ/Human, Christianity and Suffering, Rebirth or Reincarnation, Inter-religious Dialogue.

## - Day Four -

### Topics:

[Sister Meg](#) - American Benedictine Monasticism, The Divine Office, The Essence of Monastic Life, The Essence of Contemplative Life.

[Rev. Kusala](#) - A Short History of Buddhism, Buddhism in the West, Monks and Dharma Teachers, Unity and Diversity, Ordination.

[Q&A](#) - Pureland Buddhism, Tibetan Mandala's, Refuge in Buddhism, Dangers in Meditation Practice.

## - Day Five -

### Topics:

[Sister Meg](#) - Seeking God Through the Rule of St. Benedict, The Practice of Silence, The Unskillfulness of Murmuring, Pan in Kusala's Room, Ghosts and Demons, Leadership and Humility.

[Rev. Kusala](#) - Spirit's of the Dead, Life in the Monastery, Where Does Humility Come From, My Ultimate Authority.

[Q&A](#) - Where the Dharma Came From, The Pitfalls of Christian Meditation, People with Powers - Good or Evil, The Danger of Oneness, Emptiness.

## **Historic New Harmony, Indiana**

New Harmony is the site of two of America's great utopian communities. The first, Harmonie on the Wabash (1814-1824), was founded by the Harmony Society, a group of Separatists from the German Lutheran Church. In 1814, led by their charismatic leader Johann Georg Rapp, they left their first American home, Harmonie, PA. Indiana's lower Wabash Valley on the western frontier gave them the opportunity to acquire a much larger tract of land. In 1825, the Harmonists moved back to Pennsylvania and built the town of Economy near Pittsburgh. Robert Owen, Welsh-born industrialist and social philosopher, bought their Indiana town and the surrounding lands for his communitarian experiment.

The Harmonists combined the Swabian work ethic ("Work, work, work! Save, save, save!") with the Benedictine rule ("Pray and work!"). This resulted in an unheard of economic achievement that was recognized as "the wonder of the west."

### **How visitors reacted to the Harmonists' holy experiment:**

"The settlement made more rapid advances in wealth and prosperity, than any equal body of men in the world at any period of time, more, in one year, than other parts of the United States ... have done in ten."

- Matthew Carey

" But whether reverend Rapp learned this while in Germany  
Or no, 'it is said his sect is rich and godly,  
Pious and pure, beyond what I can term any  
Of ours, although they propagate more broadly."

- Lord Byron

" Niemals habe ich eine so wahrhaft patriarchalische Verfassung gesehen als hier, und das, was die Menschen gewirkt haben, spricht am Besten für ihre Einrichtungen und für die unter ihnen herrschende Eintracht."

- Duke Bernhard of Weimar

Our focus is primarily on the German sites and buildings and Harmonist history. Eight Harmonist sites and 25 Harmonist buildings are identifiable today in central New Harmony. Some of these are a part of tours, others are privately owned.

By standing under the town's only traffic light at the intersection of Main and Church Streets and looking around, one can see all of New Harmony. It is still a small town, just shy of 1,000 people, and with lots of historical reminders.

The town is a vacationer's dream and a researcher's paradise, with 12 early 19th century buildings and 20 from mid-19th century, a museum, library, gallery and a theater. The New Harmony Inn with its Conference Center, a unique assemblage of contemporary buildings within the context of the historic community, offers the comforts of city-living in a rural setting. Visitors from all over the world come to experience New Harmony's legacy of creative endeavor which has spanned more than 180 years. They discover a distinctive small town, where the simple wooden structures of the Harmonists, blend with modern architectural masterpieces on quiet tree-lined streets.

Historic restorations are not unusual, nor is community development. Why then, is this small town in southern Indiana of such importance? New Harmony has acted early to secure control in the public interest over substantial parts of its central Historic District. It is a village museum and preservation project, and it has been a center for culture and learning ever since its beginnings.

The town's unique history comes alive on guided tours offered to 15 historic sites. Some of these include period rooms and other exhibits relating to specific subjects. The guided tours begin at the Atheneum/Visitor Center.

The Harmony Society established a remarkably well-planned town on the Indiana Frontier. This deeply religious communitarian group had come from Württemberg, Germany to Pennsylvania in 1804 and relocated to the Indiana territory in 1814. In January 1825 they sold the entire town to Robert Owen of New Lanark, Scotland. By May all the Harmonists had departed for Pennsylvania, where they established their third and final settlement. Old Economy is today a National Historic Landmark village of 17 restored 1824-1830 structures and recreated 1824 gardens. 16,000 objects are exhibited there.

The Indiana years proved to be the golden decade of the Harmony society. Their industries prospered. Agricultural and manufactured products were marketed to major cities in the United States and abroad. New Harmony, with its manicured gardens and neat tree-lined street, was renowned for its beauty. The town was largely self-sufficient. There were 2000 acres of highly cultivated land, including a 15-acre vineyard and a 35-acre orchard of choice apple and pear trees. Four large brick dwellings, a steam engine, two large granaries, wool and cotton factories, a threshing machine, a 5-acre vegetable garden, and more than 126 family dwelling houses were carefully cataloged by the Harmonists in a final inventory of the town that was prepared prior to its sale to Robert Owen.

Robert Owen's ambition was to create a more perfect society through free education and the abolition of social classes and personal wealth. World-renowned scientists and educators settled in New Harmony. With the help of William Maclure, the Scottish geologist and businessman, they introduced vocation education, kindergarten and other educational reforms.

New Harmony is also the site of the early headquarters of the U.S. Geological Survey and provided the earliest geological and natural science collections for the beginnings of the Smithsonian Institute. David Dale Owen turned to geology under the influence of William Maclure. From 1830 until 1860 New Harmony was one of the most important training and research centers for the study of geology in America. Historic New Harmony is a Unified Program of the University of Southern Indiana and the Division of Indiana State Museums & Historic Sites.

[For More Info on Historic New Harmony](#)

Also See:

**Historic New Harmony, Inc.**

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## **Monastic Interreligious Dialogue**

In response to Pius XII's encyclical *Fidei donum* (1957), Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries began to make foundations in countries where Christianity had only recently been introduced: the so-called "Young Churches." In order to provide support for these new ventures the AIM Secretariat was created in 1960. At that time the anagram stood for Aide à l'Implantation Monastique. It now stands for "Alliance for International Monasticism."

As AIM became more aware of the problems facing these new monasteries, it set up meetings for superiors. The first took place in Africa (Bouaké 1964) and was followed by a meeting in Asia (Bangkok 1968). The Buddhist setting of the meeting in Bangkok helped the monastics who gathered there come to a deeper understanding of the necessity of dialogue with monastics of other religions. The message that Paul VI sent them confirmed their conviction and encouraged them to engage in this pursuit. In October 1973, in Bangalore, India, Christian and non-Christian monastics came together for the first time in history to talk with one another about the most basic issue of the monastic life, namely, the experience of God. The success of this meeting prompted Cardinal Pignedoli, who was then Prefect of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, to ask Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland to encourage Benedictines to become involved in interreligious dialogue because, as he put it, "monasticism is the bridge between religions."

As a result, AIM organized two meetings between monks and specialists in 1977, one in the United States (Petersham), and the other in Europe (Loppem). These meetings led to the creation, in 1978, of two sub-committees: NABEWD (North American Board for East-West Dialogue), now known as [MID \(Monastic Interreligious Dialogue\)](#), for North America; DIM/MID for Europe (Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique, MID for German-speaking countries.) Thus, what had been the work of individuals like J. Monchanin, H. Le Saux, Bede Giffiths and Thomas Merton was now given institutional status within the monastic world.

DIM/MID and NABEWD-MID established contacts between Christian monasteries of the West and those in Asia, especially with Hindus and Tibetan and Japanese Zen Buddhists. With the latter a program of "Spiritual Exchanges" has been taking place ever since 1979.

The gathering which took place in Assisi in 1986 provided a great stimulus for dialogue, and the work of the European DIM and the American NABEWD became too important for them to remain mere sub-committees within AIM. Thus, in 1994 they were established as a Secretariat similar to AIM, and, like it, common to both the Benedictines and the Cistercians. As the movement of dialogue continued to spread, national and regional centers were created, whose activity is coordinated on the international level by a General Secretary.

A broadening of perspectives has accompanied this organic development. In the beginning the only dialogue envisaged was that between monastics of different religions. However, even though Judaism and Islam do not have any monastic institution, they are in dialogue with Christian monastics. The dialogue of our brothers

in Atlas with Islam is a case in point. On the other hand, the Asian religions are increasingly present in the West where they have many devoted followers and a notable presence on university faculties. Those Westerners who have been influenced by Asian religions seek out Christian monastics and invite them to take part in their colloquies. On various continents DIM/MID also collaborates with other groups involved in interreligious dialogue.

This change of perspective led to the idea that monastic interreligious dialogue can also mean engaging in dialogue “as monastics”—that is to say, as people searching for God—with other searchers, no matter what their status or their religion. Dialogue thought of in this way strives to become a dialogue of religious experience. Such dialogue takes place primarily in “spiritual exchanges,” but it also includes others forms of dialogue that are in some ways preliminary and preparatory.



**Mary Margaret Funk, OSB...** has been a nun of Our Lady of Grace Monastery Beech Grove Indiana since 1961. She recited the Rule of Benedict in 1963, and took final vows in 1968. Sister Meg taught elementary school at St. Barnabas 1965-69, was an administrator for the Archdiocese in catechetics from 1969-1983, and the Archdiocese of Louisville in 1984.

She was a Prioress from 1985-1993 and in 1994 became Executive Director of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Board. In that capacity she coordinated the Gethsemani Encounter 1996, and 2002, and the Benedict's Dharma Conference in 2001. She spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1993. She traveled to India and Tibet on the 6th Spiritual Exchange Program in 1995, and has been in formal dialogue with Hindu, Zen Buddhist, Islam, Confucius, and Taoist traditions. She's currently the Executive Director of MID Board and has signed a contract till 2006.

Her book "Thoughts Matter" was published in 1998 by Continuum. It's a teaching on the 8 afflictions from John Cassian. A second book, Tools Matter was published fall 2001. Tools Matter is on practices that help us with our afflictive thoughts and help us to lift up our thoughts in prayer. She has written chapters for "Benedict's Dharma" (Riverhead, 2001) and Purity of Heart (Continuum 2001). A Book on the Gethsemani Encounter II was published by Doubleday in 2003. Sister Meg coordinates the MID Bulletin which she publishes twice a year with Editor, James Wiseman, OSB

She spoke at the Gethsemani Encounter 1996 and 2002, and has given many retreats to Monastics and lay ministers on Christian Practice. She served on Thomas Keating's Contemplative Outreach Board of Trustees, Weston School of Theology in Cambridge and was a member of the Board of Overseers of St. Meinrad School of Theology.

She holds Graduate degrees from Catholic University (1973) and Indiana University (1979). She's a graduate of Epiphany Certification Program of Formative Spirituality (2002).

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**Kusala Bhikshu** (Thich Tam-Thien) is an American born Bhikshu (monk) ordained in the Zen Tradition of Vietnam. In 1980 he became interested in Meditation, and found his way to the International Buddhist Meditation Center, and the then Vice Abbot Shinzen Young. In 1981 he took refuge, and accepted the five precepts of a lay Buddhist, and was given the name Kusala (skillful). In 1983 with a growing interest in Early Buddhism, and the encouragement of Shinzen he began his studies with the Ven. H. Ratanasara at the College of Buddhist Studies, Los Angeles.

In 1994 Kusala took novice vows, and was given the Dharma name Kusala Ratana Karuna (skillful jewel of compassion). In 1996 he received full ordination as a Bhikshu, and was given the name Thich Tam-Thien (heavenly heart mind) with the Ven. Dr. H. Ratanasara, and the Ven. Karuna Dharma as two of his ordaining masters. Along with Kusala's Bhikshu ordination he received a B.A. in Buddhist Studies, from the College of Buddhist Studies.

Kusala now lives and works at the International Buddhist Meditation Center in the Korea town section of Los Angeles. He cares for the grounds with the Vice Abbot Shanti Bhikkhu, and facilitates meditation, and discussion groups. He continues to give presentations at local schools, and colleges, and speaks in local churches on Buddhism, and social action. Kusala is the web-master for the International Buddhist Meditation Center, as well as his own site [www.UrbanDharma.org](http://www.UrbanDharma.org).

Kusala Bhikshu is a member of the Buddhist- Roman Catholic Dialogue of Los Angeles, the Wilshire Center Parish Association of Los Angeles, and the Interfaith Council of Garden Grove, Stanton, and Westminster. Kusala is Buddhist Chaplain for the University Religious Conference at U.C.L.A and director of the University Buddhist Association at UCLA... In 2000 Kusala was invited to join the UCLA Medical Center Chaplains "Spiritual Care Committee," and the Juvenile Justice Committee of Faith Communities for Families and Children.

In addition to his other duties Kusala Bhikshu gave presentations in the Los Angeles County Central Juvenile Hall on Buddhism, and meditation for four years, and for a year taught Blues Harmonica at a juvenile probation camp in Malibu, CA. Before his work in juvenile hall, and the probation camp, he spent one year as a volunteer at the Los Angeles County State Prison for men. In December of 1998 Kusala was given the "Good Samaritan of the Year" award for his work in juvenile hall by the Los Angeles County Probation Department.

In March of 2000 Kusala ended his volunteer work at Central Juvenile Hall, and accepted an invitation from the Garden Grove Police Department to become a police chaplain. Meditation, and yoga are still being taught at Central Juvenile hall thanks to the dedicated effort of various Buddhist volunteers and yoga teachers.

November of 2000 marked the beginning of his new position as the first Buddhist ride-along volunteer police chaplain in Garden Grove. On November 16, 2001 Kusala received a certificate of recognition from the California State Assembly, and a certificate of special congressional recognition from the United States Congress for his work with the Garden Grove Police Department. In January of 2002 the Mayor, and City Council of Garden Grove

honored the police chaplains with a Certificate of Appreciation.

March of 2003 found Kusala Bhikshu in Los Angeles as a guest speaker at; "A Spirituality and End-of-Life Care Conference," sponsored by Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center's Palliative Care and Spiritual Care Departments, and in Indianapolis, Indiana as a guest presenter at the "Spirituality & Healing in Medicine: A Multi-Cultural Approach" conference, sponsored by Harvard Medical School and The George Washington University.

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**Day 1 - Tuesday - April 29, 2003**

**Day One...**

**Topics:**

**Sister Meg** - The History of Benedict's Dharma the Book, History of the Rule of St. Benedict, The Spiritual Journey, Christian Renunciation and Practice.

**Rev. Kusala** - God, Soul, Heaven, Sin, the Eightfold Path, Relative and Ultimate Reality, Unity and Diversity.

**Q&A** - Levels of Dialogue, If someone breaks a Monastic Rule, IBMC and the Formless Rule, Monastic Accountability, Formless Practice, Goals.

**[Sister Meg](#) | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)**

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 1 - Tuesday - April 29, 2003**  
**Sister Mary (Meg) Margaret**

**Topics:**

[History of Benedict's Dharma](#)  
[History of the Rule of St. Benedict](#)  
[The Spiritual Journey](#)  
[Christian Renunciation and Practice](#)

**SR. MEG:** Good morning.

**SR. MEG:** What we have in mind is to go through Benedict's Dharma, the book, more or less chapter by chapter. We're going to do a Buddhist/Christian dialogue in the light of the Rule of Benedict.

How this book came about was, we had a Gethsemani encounter in 1996, which was a Buddhist/Catholic monastic dialogue. We had the Dalai Lama and about 70 participants, in all about 120 people with the observers. At the end of the dialogue there was a profound sense that we had come to a new place. It was Robert Thurman and Patrick Henry who suggested that we not go back up to superficial dialogue ever again, but to stick to the sense of the monastic impulse in our lives. Patrick Henry said, the Rule of St. Benedict is the centerpiece for monastics in the Benedictine tradition. In fact, it's hallowed in all monastic traditions. We decided to take the text of the Rule of St. Benedict for our next dialogue. That had three parts to put together.

The first part was to get a translation of the Rule of Benedict. I was the executive director of the board, and then there was this committee of Patrick Henry and David Steindl-Rast and the Buddhist writers.

It took us six years to do this, the first phase was this translation. Brother David and I looked at the one we used to use, which has the Latin and English, and the commentary, which is extremely fine. I mean, this is such a treasure for us all. However, having used it for a decade, we found that there were ways it could be improved. We set about to write our own translation, what we called a wake-up translation that was more Buddha friendly, it could be written in such a way that we could move our dialogue.

I got up a half hour earlier every day for a year and a half, and started writing, looking at the Latin and English. I understood that David was going to do one, and I was going to do one, then we were going to get together, and send it out to our board, abbots, and prioresses.

Well, I'm not a Latin scholar. I am a practitioner. But I figured anybody can do it from the Latin to the English. It's hard to go from the English to the Latin. So, I went ahead and did it chapter by chapter.

**\_\_\_The Rule of Benedict is between 7,000 and 9,000 words depending on the translation.\_\_\_**

The Rule of Benedict is between 7,000 and 9,000 words depending on the translation -- 73 chapters with the prologue, written around the year 520, or somewhere in there.

What we tried to do in this translation is make it more inclusive of women, since there are more women than men monastics. We wanted it to capture the mystical sense that Benedict used; not just the historical critical methods of literature. We tried to capture the sense of each verse and each teaching, like a counterpart to the Buddhist teachings, rather than a literal translation.

It's only been since the 1930s that we've had a verse text of the Rule of Benedict; these verses haven't been interpreted in the light of meaning, to get verse and meaning together. If this sounds technical, it is, so I'll fast forward. We tried everything, but it was impossible.

When we went to a more mystical unitive sense of what Benedict was trying to say, we alienated the scholars. When we went to more inclusive language, we alienated the feminists who wanted it more inclusive.

We even had Elias Mallon, a great Scripture scholar, an Atonement father from New York, do a fresh translation of the 300 verses of Scripture in the Rule. Well, Benedict didn't have the original text of Scripture. I had on my desk 300 translations of text that Benedict never had. Benedict was translating something else in the light of this context, so we had to scrap it. We had to go back to the way he used Scripture given the text that was available in the Sixth Century.

We alienated the scholars, the feminists, the hermeneuts, the Scripture people, and then we alienated the activists. Joan Chittister probably has the finest readable translation of the Rule, but we were trying to get more of the mystical sense, more unitive, more contemplative, we thought we could satisfy some of the scholars' objections.

Well, I finished my translation, and David and I were going to get together at Collegeville. Six years is a long time. We had trouble getting together, and in the meantime he got busy and didn't do his translation. He wanted to start over, and I would write down his translation.

Well, given the male/female thing today, I wasn't going to do that. So, in the refectory we were reading Father Abbot Patrick Barry's translation of the Rule, and I was just dumbfounded with how he had transcended all those problems. I went back to our committee and I said, "Can't we just use an existing translation?"

We did put the one we had out to the abbots and prioresses. We showed it to the board. James Wiseman alone, gave us 70 corrections. It was a huge problem... What did Benedict say and how do we interpret it today. The important part is to live the Rule, rather than know it, which is on the same page as our Buddhist friends. So, we humbly put aside all our earlier drafts, accepted Abbot Patrick Barry's who by the way, has a doctorate from Oxford and is a wonderful writer. We amended it in 50 places with his permission to Americanize some of the language. That's the text you have here. That's the first phase of the book.

The second phase was... David was to gather the Buddhists together to do a commentary on the Rule.

Well, that was hard, too, because the Buddhists were very busy Buddhists, and so David called me. We were literally going to go through each one of the Buddhists, sit down with them, read through the entire Rule and talk about it and dialogue. Well, guess again. Finally, we got together at Grace Cathedral and had a long weekend where, after lots of work, we had the text of their commentary.

Patrick Henry a masterful editor put it all together, and then he put the chapters together, and the issues together. But he also assigned topics to the Buddhists -- Ven. Yifa, Judith Simmer-Brown, Joseph Goldstein, and Norman Fischer.

The second phase was to write the book. We had a contract with Riverhead, which was a marvelous contract, and they couldn't have been better to work with. They were extremely patient and generous along the way.

The third phase... Was a conference at Beech Grove on Benedict's Dharma, where we brought all the speakers and 50 or so monastic who lived this Rule, and then another 50 or so were coming who lived the Rule as lay practitioners, we had quite a cast of people coming. Then 9/11 happened, and so many couldn't come, but we still had the conference.

All the proceedings are on the [Web](#). We taped it professionally.

It was a marvelous conference. We used the book Benedict's Dharma, we had Benedictines who lived the rule and reacted to the writers; and we had the Buddhists.

You who have gathered for this Benedictine Experience are the fourth phase. You are another generation of people that are enjoying the Rule of Benedict, and want to know more about being a lay practitioner and using the Rule, and Buddhist commentary.

We are going to start right away with the first part of the book and how it's divided. I want to give everybody one of these. It's a flier from first Benedict's Dharma and has the outline of the book in it.

I want to emphasize the book really doesn't matter. Even the Rule doesn't matter. What's written in our hearts matters; so, the quicker we can get to our hearts, the better. But it is nice to build on those who have gone before us.

**\_\_\_Today we're going to talk about the trellis, which is another word for rule.\_\_\_**

Today we're going to talk about the trellis, which is another word for the rule. Tomorrow, we're going to do freedom and forgiveness; the next day, discipline, spontaneity; the next day, tradition, adaptation; and Saturday, leadership and humility.

These are the ways we are going to enter into the Rule. They are like doors. We are going to walk into the Rule through these doors.

So, this first presentation is, what is the Rule, the trellis. Then Rev. Kusala is going to respond from a Buddhist point of view.

History helps us understand how rules evolve. If we understand the origin of a rule, we can know how it should reside in our heart, the origin, the point of departure in our heart.

The Rule of Benedict, as you know, was written around 520, but it stood on the shoulders of giants. In the earliest Apostolic age were those who knew Christ and walked with him and set down the Scriptures. The Scripture is the main rule for all Christians. It is the central door.

We can't exaggerate the role of Scripture in our lives. Benedict wrote the Rule, in 7,000 words and 300 passages all coming from Scripture. In one sense the Rule is no more than a recasting of Scripture in a particular way, for those who want to follow a contemplative path.

The first generation are those who followed Christ, witnessed to what Christ said and did, and then wrote about it in our Scriptures. The next phase, of course, was to interpret what those Scriptures mean. Well, the earliest group of monastics took seriously that the Scriptures meant a way of life, to pray without ceasing, to seek God, they left everything and went to the desert. The desert tradition is the centerpiece of Christian monasticism. In the desert these individuals were awake and understood God's word and meditated on it day and night, prayed without ceasing. They woke up in various stages of enlightenment, and were very attractive to others.

Soon people from the towns, the villages, people crossing the desert would go to them and pray for a word. "Father, give me a word that I may live by."

At first those words were from Scripture, then they were interpretations of Scripture. There's about 2,000 of them. Apophthegms, are the sayings of the desert tradition.

Those sayings were written down in various ways: The alphabetical collection, the seriate collection. They became the literature of these desert fathers and mothers. Their deeds and stories were written down. A literature arose around the enlightened teachers known as the desert fathers and mothers.

The second generation came along and interpreted those sayings, they were called the conferences and the institutes. The master of that was John Cassian, who was born around 360 in the Balkans. He was literate in both Greek and Latin. It took him from twelve to fourteen years to go through the desert of Syria, into Egypt and Palestine, he listened to those conferences given by famous abbots and amahs. He put them down in the twelve institutes and twenty-four conferences, and they are available today.

Later those conferences and institutes were given in cenobitic settings; in other words, where a group of monks and nuns were living in a community. Those were edited into rules, and out of that came the Rule of Benedict. We also have the Rule of Augustine, and the Rule of Basil. By the time Benedict put his Rule together, he had 40 sources. He was a great editor, a redactor. It's as important what he took from all those who preceded him as what he left behind. He was a genius at carving out a middle way to the ascetical life.

**\_\_\_The Rule of Benedict is just one of the many rules\_\_\_**

So, the Rule of Benedict is just one of the many rules, but it turned out to be the most famous of rules, but not for 300 or 400 years.



Let me go back to the Rule of Saint Benedict, and share with you what I think the idea of the Rule is. The Rule is just that: It's one source of my inspiration for life. The other source, of course, is Scripture in Christ. Another source is a teacher, or a leader, or an abbot, or my spiritual director. And the other source is my community, the way in which it's lived, the monastery. A lived experience of the Rule in the light of Scripture and in the light of a teacher. But, the main teacher is Christ. If you want to know who to follow, return to Christ.

You can see this referent idea. In other words, I am in the center, and in the center I listen to my teacher, Christ our Lord. I find those teachings in Scripture, and it's interpreted by the church.

But, I live in a monastery, and who interprets the Gospel for me and the Rule for me, my abbot. The abbot then becomes the interpreter of the Rule of Benedict. But I have the Rule, too, so we can dialogue about the Rule together. And that's the stuff of our individual conferences.

I also dialogue with my entire community, and that's the idea behind a chapter: To keep central the word of God in our lived experience as a community.

It's not linear at all; it's very dialogical. You have to know the Rule; you have to know the Gospel; you have to have an abbot; you have to have, a lived experience of a community.

One other part of the teaching that helps Benedict make sense that you don't quite get just reading the Rule, it would be found -- the systematizer of the earlier tradition was John Cassian, and I'd like to present his notion of the spiritual journey. His teacher was Evagrius, and Evagrius's teacher was Origen, a great mystic.

Origen was the first to use the idea of a spiritual journey, a journey of the heart, it's an invisible journey. You might say it's under the river.

Most people are on an external journey. You know, they are born, they live, they lead a good life, and they go to heaven. But some are called to a spiritual journey underneath the river, to experience heaven through the mystical senses that open up through a deeper reading of Scripture.

That was Origen's contribution. Have I lost you yet?

**PARTICIPANT:** Not yet.

**SR. MEG:** The journey is above the river and below the river. The spiritual journey is below the river. Nobody sees it. It's your motivation. It's your inner life. It's your heart.

Above the river is the church, the world, the people. They are living a good life. They are out there doing God's work, and that's what you see. When you are baptized, you begin the journey. You are on the above the river journey.

Some of us are called, but all of us can enter into the spiritual journey.

Some of us are called, but all of us can enter into the spiritual journey. There are other

metaphors, but I'm trying to give you the one that underpins the Rule of Benedict.

The idea of entering a monastery is to do the below the river journey instead of just living the worldly life; it's to renounce the world for the sake of God. John Cassian was the one who put together these ideas of renunciations. It's really a series of renunciations.

Renunciation is not an optional notion in the Christian life, it's in the baptismal formula that we renounce Satan. We renounce the ways of the world for the sake of God.

The first renunciation is to renounce your former way of life, which is living externally. You have to renounce the good that is not God. You have to renounce evil for sure! That's the first renunciation. Over and over again we have to continually renounce our former way of life.

The second renunciation is to renounce the thoughts of our former way of life. John Cassian took the eight thoughts from Evagrius. The first thought is food, food and drink, because if you are obsessing about food and drink, you are not praying without ceasing. You are not under the river. You are not with God. You are thinking only of yourself. Those are thoughts of food, sex, things, anger, dejection or depression.

The next one is acedia, and it really doesn't have a good translation. I like to use the translation, spiritual fatigue. You just want off the journey. It's too much work.

The last two thoughts are vainglory and pride. Those are what you renounce over and over again, the eight afflictions.

There are many tools in the Rule to renounce the eight afflictions, look at Chapter 4. But even if you renounce our former way of life, and follow the monastic way of life, *conversatio morum* -- that doesn't have a good translation either. It means ongoing conversion to the monastic way of life. It's not just a one-time conversion. It's an ongoing conversion, turning toward a manner of life.

After you renounce your former way of life and you renounce the thoughts of your former way of life, lo and behold, there's a third renunciation, and that's to renounce your thoughts of God. Because, as long as it's just a thought of God, it's not God; it's just thoughts.

Here is where we are really on the same page with our Buddhist brothers and sisters. But they do it from the get-go. You're going to hear a lot more about Buddhists renouncing the illusionary world of thoughts, which is also a teaching found in the Rule of Benedict.

This third renunciation, is a very serious one, this is the stuff of the dark nights. You don't have thoughts of God or devotions, it's a very challenging time. But you can also wake up to the mystery of God, and the light of God.

It's a powerful renunciation. If you get through the third renunciation, guess what, there's a fourth one, and it's harder than the third.

**Renounce thoughts of yourself,  
\_\_\_because any thoughts of yourself isn't yourself.\_\_\_**

When I wrote Thoughts Matter I didn't put the fourth one in because I'm so far from it, and I didn't notice it in Cassian either. Columba Stewart, a monk of St. John's, a wonderful scholar monk, pointed it out to me. He said, "Meg, there's a fourth renunciation." It's to renounce thoughts of yourself, those thoughts are not you, they are just thoughts. We seem to be on the same page as the Buddhists; so the last one is to renounce thoughts of yourself.

The Christian renunciation theory and practice has four steps according to John Cassian: to renounce one's former way of life, to renounce interior thoughts that would move you back into acting like your former way of life, to renounce your thought of God...since all thoughts of God are not God, but just thoughts or concepts. The fourth renunciation is the most radical. It's presumed in the Rule of St. Benedict and we have saints, like Therese of Lisieux who gave us a good example: to renounce the thoughts of self and respond to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The self then merges into the Beloved or mystery without any of the ego thoughts that refer to the self.

**RJH:** I was just thinking about what you are saying and imagining myself as an oblate, and thinking, gee, it sort of sounds like I've got one foot on the dock and one on the boat. And I'm wondering if that is a tenable position, or place to be.

**SR. MEG:** It's stressful. And you might get a stress fracture.

Spiritual direction is to help us live below the water, but in the world. There are ways of doing this. And that's why Benedict's Dharma 2 is happening, to get this balance, so that we can live in peace and equanimity. We have the tools in the rule.

**BC:** You mentioned a name, but it went by, I didn't recognize it, somebody who was a practitioner.

**KM:** Therese of Lisieux.

**SR. MEG:** Teresa Little Flower. She is just a wonderful example of no self.

## **Day 1**

**Sister Meg | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)**

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 1 - Tuesday - April 29, 2003**  
**Rev. Kusala Bhikshu**

**Topics:**

God

Soul

Heaven Sin

The Eightfold Path

Relative and Ultimate Reality

Unity and Diversity

**REV. KUSALA:** All right, it's time for Buddhism.

Let me say here at the outset, Buddhism is not better or worse than other religions; it's just different. A friend once asked, "Kusala, do you think, Buddhism is the best religion?" And I said, "I think Buddhism is the best religion for Buddhists."

I'd like to start by clarifying a few points.

The first one is important, because it deals with God. A lot of people think Buddhists are atheists because they don't talk about God. I tell people, if you want to find God become a Christian, Jew, Muslim, or Hindu.

The reason Buddhists don't talk about god is not because there isn't one, but because the Buddha never met a Jew. Twenty-five hundred years ago the only people practicing the religion of the one God of the desert, were the Jews. The Buddha never left India. He never went any further than two hundred miles from his birthplace. His world was filled with many gods.

\_\_\_Does that mean that all Buddhists are atheists?\_\_\_

Does that mean that all Buddhists are atheists?

No! I have met many Buddhists who believe in God. I have met many Buddhists who don't believe in God. I have met a lot of Buddhists who just don't care. If you're a Buddhist these three points of view are okay, Buddhism is only concerned with suffering, and the end of suffering.

Another point -- The Buddha said we don't have a soul. But, he wasn't talking about the Christian concept of soul. He was talking about the Brahman concept of soul.

Having said there is no soul concept in Buddhism, and that God is not the focus of our practice, you may be wondering if we go to heaven. The answer is yes, we go to Buddhist heaven.

Only Buddhists can go to Buddhist heaven though, because Buddhist practice determines which one of the thirty-three Buddhist heavens we go to. Heaven is not the ultimate goal for a Buddhist, however. Our goal is to achieve Nirvana and end suffering as well as our future rebirths.

The Buddha once said, "I teach the path to immortality," but he wasn't saying you don't have to die. Even Christ had to die. He was saying, you don't have to be reborn again to suffer.

You might be thinking... Well how about sin?

In Buddhism there is original ignorance, not sin. According to Buddhism, we're born stupid, we do dumb things, and we suffer. What's needed is the transformation of ignorance and delusion into wisdom and compassion.

Wisdom and compassion from a Buddhist perspective goes something like this, instead of greed, generosity. Instead of hatred and anger, loving-kindness and compassion. Instead of ignorance and delusion, wisdom. Buddha nature, is the potential all humans have to realize this kind of perfection.

We don't have sin, and I don't think we have good and evil either. In my mind, in order to have ultimate good a divine law giver is necessary, like God. No God, no ultimate good.

**\_\_\_ Instead of God and the Devil, we have "more suffering and less suffering." \_\_\_**

Buddhists don't have God or the Devil in their cosmology. Instead of God and the Devil, ultimate good and ultimate bad, we have "more suffering and less suffering." Our reference point is not divinely based. Lacking a divine law giver, Buddhism also lacks a system of justice. The Buddhist system of making things right is karma.

Okay, I'm going to stop here and get to the task at hand, Benedict's Dharma.

I was thinking about the trellis a few days ago, and remembered one of the Buddhist's in the Book "Benedict's Dharma" felt the 'Dharma' was similar to a trellis. I think the 'Nobel Eightfold Path' is similar as well.

The Nobel Eightfold Path is right View, right Intention, right Speech, right Action, right Livelihood, right Effort, right Mindfulness, and right Concentration.

We can take those eight path factors and put them into three categories.

**SR. MEG:** Can you do those eight again, please.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes. They are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

We can take those eight path factors and put them into three categories: Personal discipline, mental purification, and wisdom.

In that first category of personal discipline we find right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

In the second category of mental purification we find right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In the third category of wisdom we find right view and right intention.

As the week goes on, I will talk specifically about each one of these path factors and explain how we as Buddhists use them to get rid of our greed, hatred, and delusion.

I have been asked many times if Nirvana can happen in just one lifetime?

Nirvana seems to be a many lifetime proposition. The Buddha according to the Jataka Tales, was enlightened at least 550 times, before he archived Nirvana as Siddhattha Gotama.

Some people say Buddhism is a philosophy, some say a way of life, and some say a religion. Well to me, it's all of those. But the goal is a bit different from Christianity. The Buddhist goal is the end suffering, ours and yours.

**LDB:** Isn't one of the main tenets getting rid of duality -- duality is at the heart of suffering, is it not?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, duality is very much a part of suffering. But rather than getting rid of duality, I think it's more about creating a new relationship with duality. Mind can only understand something when it's in a relative context. If I kill duality, wouldn't I become less functional as a human being? I might not suffer, but I couldn't eat, talk, walk, or understand anything. Enlightenment seems to be about becoming more human in the best sense, rather than less.

\_\_\_ **"It's really good to meditate, but don't forget your zip code."** \_\_\_

One of my favorite spiritual people is Ram Dass, he said, "It's really good to meditate, but don't forget your zip code." So, relative is important.

**VKH:** What is your definition of suffering?

**REV. KUSALA:** Good question. My answer comes from a seventh-grader named

Esmeralda.

I was giving a presentation at a middle school in Glendale, California, and this girl, eleven years old, after my presentation raised her hand and said. "Rev. Kusala, I now understand the difference between pain and suffering. Suffering happens when you don't want to have the pain." How did she know?

Suffering occurs when we want things to be different than they are.

**JO:** Say that again.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, suffering occurs when we want things to be different than they are.

**JO:** Good.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes.

**KS:** Well, understanding duality, is that unity?

**SR. MEG:** Repeat it.

**KS:** Understanding or accepting duality, does that lead to unity, balance?

**In Buddhism, there are two levels of reality, relative and ultimate.**

**REV. KUSALA:** In Buddhism, there are two levels of reality, relative and ultimate.

The ultimate is unity, and the relative is diversity. I think the idea of oneness misinterprets the ultimate unitive experience. Unity is a much better way of understanding the ultimate level of reality for a Buddhist.

My body always lives in relative reality. Only my mind can go into that ultimate place of unity and achieve Nirvana. Some people want to ignore relative reality and live only in the ultimate, that just doesn't seem to work.

Great confusion can arise after going into deep states of unitive consciousness. Where all things are interconnected, interdependent, and empty of value. Self/Ego can cause much suffering, it is the one thing that is always separate. But, if I were to get rid of my ego I couldn't function.

So the big question is... How am I going to keep one foot in the relative, and one foot in the ultimate? How can I transform ego from the 'Master' into a much needed tool for living in this complicated world of ours? How do I find balance, using both realities at the same time in my everyday life?

**PDP:** If I use the sentence, and I'm Christian and I say, addressing the issue of good and evil, if I say, everything God created in the world, everything, good and evil, everything is connected, as you use the word, is that very similar? Do we connect as a Buddhist and Christian with that statement?

**REV. KUSALA:** Diversity is necessary for unity, and unity is the key to creating community. According to Buddhism we are all interconnected. The real challenge for any of us living in a diverse community, is to find the connective tissue that links us all together?

Now, if you're a Christian, you might say God is the link. God is the connective tissue. If you are a Buddhist, you could say suffering is the link, because all beings suffer. If you are a mediator, you might say silence is the link, because until someone speaks everyone is connected.

We're connected because of diversity, not in spite of it.

**RJH:** Would you say that as we are doing, not as we're worshipping and being together and being silent and all of those ways we are together, connected, but as we are discussing the Rule, would you say that we are connected by a common search for wisdom?

**REV. KUSALA:** I think as Buddhists and Christians we need to be careful when we define our ultimate goal, our ultimate truth, and what connects us. In fact, we may not be able to define it at all, only experience it.

**RJH:** I'm just talking about our common search. Why are we in this dialogue? What are we looking for?

**\_\_\_I think the most obvious connection is heart.\_\_\_**

**REV. KUSALA:** Well, we may be looking for how we're connected, and to me the most obvious connection is heart. Our minds are so different, but our hearts seem to be pretty much the same. That may be the link?

All right, I'm going to stop here, this has been really great. Thank you for all the questions.

I would like to finish this first presentation with a reading? These are the first few verses from something called, "Verses of the Faith-Mind," from a book edited by Jack Kornfield, called "Teachings of the Buddha," published by Shambhala.

*"The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. When the deep meaning of things is not understood, the mind's essential peace is disturbed to no avail.*

*The Way is perfect, like vast space where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess.*



*Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things. Live neither in the entanglements of outer things, nor in inner feelings of emptiness. Be serene in the oneness of things and such erroneous views will disappear by themselves. When you try to stop activity to achieve the passivity, your very effort fills you with activity. As long as you remain in one extreme or the other, you will never know Oneness.*

*Those who do not live in the single Way fail in both activity and passivity, assertion and denial. To deny the reality of things is to miss their reality; to assert the emptiness of things is to miss their reality. The more you talk and think about it, the further astray you wander from the truth. Stop talking and thinking, and there is nothing you will not be able to know. To return to the root is to find the meaning, but to pursue appearances is to miss the source. At the moment of inner enlightenment there is a going beyond appearance and emptiness. The changes that appear to occur in the empty world, we call real because of our ignorance. Do not search for the truth; only cease to cherish opinions."*

Thank You.

**Day 1**

**Sister Meg | Rev. Kusala | Q & A**

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 1 - Tuesday - April 29, 2003**  
**Questions and Answers**

**Topics:**

Levels of Dialogue

If someone breaks a Monastic Rule

IBMC and the Formless Rule

Monastic Accountability

Formless Practice

The Goal

**SR. MEG:** It says in the program, "discussion," but I asked Betty if she would let me facilitate dialogue, which is a more serious form of conversation.

Discussion, you know, comes from the root word of bang together, concussion. And dialogue comes from the root word of listening with heart, true listening to the one, so we want to move to dialogue.

I remember after the Gethsemani I Encounter, we were meeting in Bloomington in '99 with the Dalai Lama -- he was here for the Kalachakra -- and we invited him to Gethsemani II, which was just last April.

And he said, "Oh, yes, yes, dialogue, Level 1, Level 1. Level 2 maybe, Level 2." He was trying to push us to Level 2 dialogue, so I would like to move us to Level 2 dialogue.

Level 1 dialogue is learning more about Buddhism, learning more about the Rule, learning more about our differences and the way we dress, what we do, how we talk, you know, language, but it's still superficial.

**\_\_\_Level 2 dialogue is our own hearts and our process, our practice.\_\_\_**

Level 2 dialogue is our own hearts and our process, our practice. So, we are going to move to Level 1 dialogue first, which is in the group where we continue to clarify, Kusala might ask me, "Well, all right, Meg, do you live this Rule," or, "What's the Rule to you, really?" And I could ask him, "There are 227, and you've only not kept one?"

But we don't want too much intimacy, that's not the reason for which the Rule exists, and that's our own journey. So, that would be the first Level. I would encourage you to go to Level 2 dialogue, which can happen through diads. You know, in a group like this, I'm not going to tell Kusala anything that I don't want you to know or him to know, a one-to-one dialogue is the way in which it really happens, where you lay out your heart. And that's the beginning of spiritual direction.

My director says to me, "Meg, what's on your heart today?" And then I just lay out my heart at the time, and then she can see the afflictions that arise or whatever and help me through them, or keep me faithful to my practice, or give me a word from Scripture. So, this laying out our hearts to one another can really only be done one to one, this is the origin of confession, to confess where you are.

**REV. KUSALA:** Sister Meg, Jane just asked me a question about the robes I'm wearing, and if I may, I'd like to take a few moments now to answer.

I'm ordained in the Vietnamese Zen tradition. In that tradition we wear brown robes, and brown pajamas (shirt and pants). That's why I sometimes look like a UPS guy. This is called a rakusu (yellow bib like vestment) or what I call my traveling kesa (floor length outer robe). It's filled with symbolism.

There are little squares on each corner, and it's said on each one of those little squares is a Dharma protector, a Buddhist angel, that looks out for the welfare of the person wearing it. This is one of my vestments. I have a long robe too and it goes all the way to the floor, but the rakusu is a bit more comfortable to wear.

\_\_\_**To give you an idea of how Buddhist robes are color coded.**\_\_\_

To give you an idea of how Buddhist robes are color coded, if I were a monk in the Theravada tradition, the early Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, I'd wear a saffron robe. If I came from the Chinese tradition, I'd wear a lighter golden brown color robe. If I came from the Korean tradition, I would wear a gray robe. If I came from the Japanese tradition, I would wear a black robe. If I came from the Tibetan tradition, I'd wear a maroon robe with orange trim, by far the best fashion statement.

We still don't have an American Buddhist robe, because we don't have American Buddhism yet. But when we do have American Buddhism, I think our robes will be blue denim!

(Laughter)

**JO:** Well, the dark blue doesn't show dirt as easily as other colors. It just sort of melts into the sky, and you find peasants all over the world wearing denim. I have a Chinese blue denim jacket, and I think I have a French one. It's rather universal. Denim started with the French from Nimes, France, you know. There are all varieties of it. Some is more expensive and some is thinner. Anyway, I like the idea. It's universal.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, and it's very '60s, most cool.

**JO:** It connects. We have to find those denominators.

\_\_\_**In your monastic tradition,  
if someone breaks a rule, do they have to admit to it.**\_\_\_

**REV. KUSALA:** Sr. Meg I would like to start by asking you a question. In your monastic tradition, if someone breaks a rule, do they have to admit to it, or does the community bring it to their attention?

**SR. MEG:** Thank you for that question. The Rules of Saint Benedict are also augmented by the customs in my house, so there are several sets which probably are 271. And we do have a way of all the above.

The superior, the prioress can go to someone and let them know that they are breaking a rule, or the members in mutual obedience can go to anyone and say, this isn't helping us as a community when you do such and such.

And there is also a way when a person discovers herself that they have heard, they can go before either the prioress or the community and acknowledge their faults. And so there is a three-way thing: The individual, the lateral mutual, and the superior. And it's done at specific times, the chapter of faults or chapter meetings or house meetings, sometimes before meals, at our conferences with our prioress.

So, we have ways of doing that because without it, there is no way to change and get back on track, or there is no way to intervene somebody before they get so far away from the spirit of the Rule. I've seen over the years great benefit from it.

But two other parts to the answer are it has to be a balance of those three things. It can't just be a superior. When I was the superior, if somebody came to me and said, "Jane is doing something that irritates me," I would say, "Have you told Jane?" So, you know, just like the dynamics, I would never tell Jane that Betty thinks you're whatever.

But in Chapter 72 on good zeal, mutual obedience, it's right in the Rule to mutually help each other, the younger and the older. And that's it, too, that the younger can correct an older one in the light of the Rule. That's why we all have to know the Rule. And then we also have the chapters where we can set the broad directions of our community, and we can critique it. So, we do good group process and it's in the spirit of our Rule.

So, yes, and it goes on and on and on. And it's very humbling to live with 90-year-olds who come to you and say, "Sister, I'm sorry for..." And you just feel so honored that they want to even tell you; and you just hope that when you grow up, you want to be like them, you know; that they are so vigilant.

**JO:** The Harmonists have a very important rule: "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath," and I'm sure that's with the Buddhists, too, and they tried to practice that. If there was a bobble between them, "Work it out before the sun sets."

**SR. MEG:** And the Our Father that we say, it's supposed to be said in silence. The superior starts it, and then we say the rest of it in silence. And during that silence, you are supposed to make sure that you are reflecting on if there is anybody that you should go to before you go to bed and ask for forgiveness.

You know, there is a counterbalance to that, though. You are never to give a hollow greeting of peace; so, until you are at peace in your heart, you can't go to someone. So, there is another tradition -- this is more than you want to know, Kusala -- called the senpectae, somebody who is an elder. You can go to somebody and say, "Would you tell that person I'm sorry, because I can't tell them yet," so, you ask somebody else to do it for you.

Or the superior might say, I don't want to come down hard on so and so, would you go and try to get them to conform a little bit. So, we use each other for the good, but again it's an admonition in the Rule. So, thanks for that question.

**REV. KUSALA:** Okay.

**SR. MEG:** I have one for you.

**REV. KUSALA:** Okay.

**SR. MEG:** You live in a formless way at the IBMC. I've been there.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, that's true.

**SR. MEG:** Tell the group about your formlessness rule.

**REV. KUSALA:** Think of IBMC (International Buddhist Meditation Center) as a center parish in a busy downtown setting. Everyday we hear gunshots, helicopters, and sirens, there are lots of graffiti and trash. It's not what you think of, when you think of monastery. But, that's just where a Buddhist center needs to be, it's where a lot of people suffer.

Our center was founded on the idea of being a nondenominational Buddhist center. In the past we've had teachers from many Buddhist traditions live and teach at IBMC, and because of that, our practice schedule is varied and sporadic.

Now, contrast that to a more traditional Zen center, you are up at a certain time, you dress a certain way, and you sit a certain way.

**LDB:** Tight ship.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, in those more traditional centers everything is structured, the rules, the time, and the form. It might be possible in that kind of environment to hide in form; to simply take on the form of the center and look mindful and tranquil.

**It becomes obvious  
\_\_\_\_within a matter of weeks where your practice is coming from.\_\_\_\_**

Well, the IBMC lacks that kind of form, it becomes obvious within a matter of weeks where your practice is coming from.

We don't discourage or encourage you as much as offer you a place to practice, and instruction if needed. There is a certain freedom in that; our center allows you to practice without too many strings attached. But, that kind of freedom isn't for everyone. Sometimes too much freedom turns practice into chaos.

Right now, we have three monks from Sri Lanka, two Tibetan Buddhist nuns and one Tibetan monk living at the IBMC. The abbess of the center is ordained in the Vietnamese Zen tradition, as am I.

We have this convergence, if you will, of different traditions living together, practicing together, and accepting one another, for the most part.

**SR. MEG:** So the form has to be interior.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, at our center your form needs to come from the inside. There just isn't a lot of exterior form.

When I go to Shasta Abbey, which is one of my favorite Buddhist monasteries, located in northern California, I see a lot of form. They allow me to be a part of their form when I visit, what a pleasant change of pace, to have that much form after having so little.

But I see form also prevents me from diverting from it. With all the community service work I do, I need the flexibility of 'no form' to be an effective Buddhist volunteer in Los Angeles and Orange County.

**SR. MEG:** So, your life is closer to theirs than it is to mine?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, in some ways it is, but I can't get married, and I have precepts to practice. I live in an economy of generosity, it gives me a certain freedom that nine to fivers don't have. Then again, I'm never quite sure if anybody is going to be kind and generous with me, but somehow it all works out. The universe meets all my needs, but it doesn't meet all my wants.

**KM:** Sister Meg, can I ask a question of you that's a follow-up? This is kind of embarrassing. Does it feel bad when somebody corrects you? I mean, do you feel like you're getting in trouble, or do you, when you are calling somebody on the carpet, is that awkward? Is it uncomfortable? Are there lingering problems? Do you get used to it?

**SR. MEG:** Well, it's very difficult. There's probably nothing more difficult than to either call somebody to accountability or to be called to accountability. It just is that it's necessary to live in form because the form would just dissipate without it. And it's obedience. It's the way to listen, and it's the way to remove the ego, to remove the self-centeredness, and to lay us down like Jesus on the cross.

**\_\_\_I come from a house, we are 85 women, and there are 37 younger than I am.\_\_\_**

Now, is it easy? No. And does it always work? No. I come from a house, we are 85 women, and there are 37 younger than I am. And most of these women come from a very liberal culture, and they don't want to be called to accountability. And women, you know, they want -- diversity seems to be creativity, which would be my way or the highway.

And, so, dialogue again is the middle way. It's to establish a relationship of trust so that when there is something, you can say it to them, or you can pray for them. So that's the goal, but it's not easy.

But we tend not to be confrontational because nobody is unkind, either, and we tend to wait until it's appropriate to say something. But we give ourselves times that are open.

We just finished our chapter of faults for Good Friday, and we spent the morning going to each person -- there were 70 nuns in the room -- and looking each other in the eye and saying, "Have I offended you in any way this year?" And they would say, "Well, yes, you did," or, "No, you didn't." Or you go to the next one, "Do we have any matter?" And I'd have to say, "Yes, there is this." And the other person would say, "Well, there is this." So, it took us a long period in the morning.

**KM:** Do you feel at the end of that a healing between the two of you?

**SR. MEG:** Oh, enormous, and gratitude, and so much love, and start over. The air is clean and fresh. Easter, you should have heard the voices on Easter Sunday morning, the purity of that sound, because there was no matter between us.

Now, I don't know if it lasted until Vespers, but the purity.

**OO:** Sister, I was thinking when you first started to answer the question, it sounded like tattle tailing a little bit from school; but then my thoughts went on again to what Thomas Merton said -- we've got it on the shrine -- about how saints can't even live in community.

**SR. MEG:** Well, there are people out of relationships, and we bring them back. They don't even show up for some of those things, but we have a huge embrace. I'm on my 42nd year, so it doesn't matter if somebody is gone a year or two; they come back. We're not fussy.

**RJH:** Kusala, I guess my first response to your speaking was that in some ways you aren't really a serious monastic. But as I listened, this wonderful thing about practice and no form, again it made me think of my own situation because I came to the Rule looking for a trellis for my ministry.

**I'm a parish priest,  
\_\_\_and the parish is a place of mostly no form, at least my parish is. \_\_\_**

I'm a parish priest, and the parish is a place of mostly no form, at least my parish is. So, I began to think differently about you. That's interesting because I begin to sympathize with that place of no form because that's what I struggle with; and that's what I look for in the

Rule is that trellis, that place of form. So, I guess my question to you is: If you live in a place of no form or perhaps just a little form, where do you put the big form? Where does it live in you? Where does it come from? What do you do with it?

**REV. KUSALA:** Well, it requires self limitation. The big form arises out of my taking the precepts of a monk, and finding refuge in the Buddha and his teachings. My practice is fine tuned through self-awareness, guidance from others, and living in community. Even though the IBMC doesn't have as much form as Sr. Meg's convent, I find people are always willing to tell me how uncomfortable I make them feel. A wake up call, not a Buddha yet.

Form can come out of an urgency to practice, as well. I am 54, and realize that death is closer than it's ever been before. A wise person once said, "Good health is simply the slowest way a human being can die."

My commitment to working as a community volunteer is something I learned from my teacher Dr. Ratanasara. He understood how important community service was. I find being of service to community allows me to have more form, not less; that service adds structure to my practice.

Heart and mind offer a kind of form as well. In my mind are all the things I've talked about today, and in my heart is all the suffering I see and feel. "The world is on fire," the Buddha said. Heart gives my practice intention, and mind turns that intention into speech and action.

I don't recommend a formless practice, it's very easy to lose your way. In my community some people are eager to point at me and say, "You lost it. Then other people are eager to help me find it. Community is a blessing and a curse, but really necessary.

**MML:** When you talked about the bookends, the meditation practice, to me that suggested form. I think of books falling down; but if you have your bookends, you have some form, and you do use that.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, at the IBMC we have a weekly schedule rather than a daily one, some days I find myself meditating with others, and some days meditating by myself. That form, that -- just a quick story to go with that.

When I first started practicing, when I first became involved with Buddhism, I really wanted to commit myself to it; I said to myself I'm going to meditate ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the evening. Then I went to fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes in the evening, and I realized my practice was a whole half hour long every day, and my life filled the other 23 1/2 hours.

When I did my first retreat, and immersed myself in Buddhist practice, for a whole weekend I had no life, just a very long and focused practice. I came to realize, as my practice deepened, I had less and less life and more and more practice.

Everything I do seems to be practice.



I have come to the point in my practice where I have almost no life at all; everything seems to be practice.

**JO:** By life, you mean personal wants, needs when you say you have less life?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes.

**JO:** What do you mean by less life?

**REV. KUSALA:** Well, I don't try and have a life anymore. In the same way, I don't try to have fun. Fun just seems to happen, like life. It's weird.. When I stopped trying to have a life, it just started to happen all by itself. Life just happens when I do stuff.

I have a couple of web sites I work on every day, and I like my Macintosh computer. In fact, I'm rather attached to it. But I've found joy and happiness occur because of what I do, not what I have. On the other hand, joy and happiness always bring sadness and suffering; if you have one, you're going to have the other, sooner or later. I have a very full life, but it's mostly filled with practice. I have less life, because I have more practice. I have more doing and less being.

**JO:** Trade-off.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, in a way. I was talking to some teenagers confined in the UCLA Medical Center Psychiatric ward. There was this one girl in for drug treatment, who said, "You know, the best part about life are the highs and lows. I love the roller-coaster ride."

**KS:** When you work in community, how do you separate failure from sorrow when you try to accomplish something and you can't get the other party to agree with you on the rules?

**REV. KUSALA:** Good question. I never really accomplish much I set out to do. It's a sad commentary, but does anyone ever reach the goal. Or, is the goal simply and illusion of the path?

The Buddha said: "We are always in a constant state of becoming;" We are always becoming something, but never attaining it." It's more about process, than event. For me it's not about reaching a goal, no matter how good the goal is, it's all about investing myself in the process.

**Day 1**

**Sister Meg | Rev. Kusala | Q & A**

**Day 2 - Wednesday - April 30, 2003**

**Day Two ...**

**Topics:**

**Sister Meg** - The Effects of Original Sin, The Art of Discernment, The Essence of Vigils, The Difference Between Therapy and Spirituality.

**Rev. Kusala** - What is Freedom, Is Ownership Real, Forgiveness and Acceptance, Patience.

**Q&A** - How Does a Catholic Die, How Does a Buddhist Die, The Difference Between Suicide and Dying in a State of Grace, A Visit to the Coroner's Office, Compassion and Loving-Kindness, Getting Ready for Death.

**[Sister Meg](#) | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)**

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 2 - Wednesday - April 30, 2003**  
**Sister Mary (Meg) Margaret**

**Topics:**

[The Effects of Original Sin](#)

[The Art of Discernment](#)

[The Essence of Vigils](#)

[The Difference Between Therapy and Spirituality](#)

**SR. MEG:** My part this morning in a minor presentation is to return to the idea of our diads, and to put your mind at ease as to what you would be doing if you did a diad or a triad. It's a follow-up to Rev. Kusala's presentation on forgiveness, because a diad in this tradition is a manifestation of thoughts before they become actions; it's to get at the root of what rises from underneath. If you can start noticing it, you can redirect those thoughts and feelings before they come out in afflictions.

In the desert tradition, the amahs and abbas, were very surprised, at least as the story goes, when they left all things -- their possessions, their status, their families, their relationships -- and yet those things followed them into the desert. In their hearts, they had even more possessions.

Notice how Rev. Kusala said, "I don't have a lot of things, but I'm really attached to the ones I have."

You can leave the river and dive underneath and go to the desert, go to the cell, but it all comes with you in your heart. The desert fathers and mothers battled with those afflictions, and overcame them through God's grace, and learned to pray without ceasing. They had different kinds of ascetical practices to reduced their afflictions.

After they reduced the afflictions, keen insight, purity of heart, equanimity arose. God's presence was abiding in their hearts. Visitors would notice this glow, this beauty, this transparency, of an illumined person. That's why they were so attractive.

When a disciple would go to the desert fathers and say, "Give me a word that I may live. I, too, would like to know what you've done." Then they would give him a word. They could see into the disciple's hearts, see what their affliction was.

Notice the practice there. The disciple practiced humility, asking for a word, asking, "What can I do?" The practice really turns into a disposition more than a practice, but the disciple wanting a home base, would go towards humility.

**The way of the teacher is the way of discernment.**

I am before our Creator God in total openness with my mind and my heart to receive God's word and to live and imitate Christ. Our disposition, our way is a way of humility. But the way of the teacher is the way of discernment, and he or she would discern how the disciple

is to practice.

We can learn ways of discernment; but the reason we can't discern and need a teacher, is because what comes up is afflicted. We can't trust our thoughts. We can't trust our heart's desire. It's contaminated.

We also have the effects of original sin.

Augustine would tell us that we have a propensity towards evil. We are created good, but we still have a propensity towards evil. We like evil in a way. It feels good, to do bad.

We also have ignorance. We don't know what good is, because our minds are clouded.

We also have a weak will. Even if we know what good is, even if we want to turn away from evil, we can't sustain it. We need more strength and lots of grace.

Those three dynamics keep us humble, because we know we are not free. It is through God's grace we can do all things, in him we have strength.

Our charge is humility. The teacher's charge is to teach us the way, and the way is through humility. The reason why we lay our thoughts on a wise elder is because he or she can see our thoughts.

Are we deluding ourselves? Are we in ignorance? Are we really just, trying to get what we want? Even if we are living a very virtuous life, are we doing all the right things for the wrong reasons? Are we full of vainglory, full of pride, carnal pride? Spiritual pride? That's the teaching I put together in, "Thoughts Matter", it's all about afflicted thoughts.

Thoughts rise from underneath, they rise gently at first. But, if you give thoughts more energy, more desire, they fan into emotions, and emotions fan into passions.

Passions are still passive. We have to give consent in order to act. That's the reason why a lot of our tradition is about this idea of consenting.

**\_\_\_The way to start discerning for ourselves, is to see these thoughts rising.\_\_\_**

But way before we consent, we've got these thoughts rising. The way to start discerning for ourselves, is to see these thoughts rising. Thought is a technical term, which means any rising on the screen of consciousness. It could be a feeling. It could be an emotion. It could be a physical impetus. It's an electronic surge. But the traditional word is "thought," sometimes translated as "fault," it just rises.

Now, if you had a wise elder, like I have in Jane, she will ask me, "Meg, dear, what is on your heart?"

Well, if I can get to the earliest inclination of my thoughts, a rising affliction and just lay it out, it will dissipate. A thought can be unthunk, it will just go away.

It can also go in a circular way and gain a thickness, if I keep it inside and start churning it with a lot of commentary. Laying it out ever so simply and gently to a wise elder, allows the elder to give me words; sometimes that's enough. We don't have enough wise elders in our culture today, but we need to bring these thoughts up, and lay them out to someone.

This is the earliest form. It's called exagoreusis. It's a Greek word, it follows the Greek word for thought. Thoughts mean little thoughts that have these tails on them, so they can hook into the next thought. This goes way back to Plato and the neoplatonic philosophers. But Origen, the teacher of Evagrius who taught Cassian, was fascinated with the idea of thoughts, and so was John Climacus.

Benedict in his Rule says, cast your thoughts against the rock who is Christ, or manifest your thoughts to the abbot or a wise elder.

But this tradition dropped out by the seventh century, because the abbots became administrators, and the tradition of confession took over, just manifesting sin, instead of redirecting it.

If I were in a line for groceries, I'd practice watching thoughts rise. I know there are practices like this, where you lay aside thoughts of greed, or impatient self. You watch your thoughts. You simply become aware of thoughts.

**\_\_\_This is the essence of vigils, to be aware of your thoughts.\_\_\_**

This is the essence of vigils, to be aware of your thoughts. As the morning sun rises, you let your thoughts rise, and observe them. In the Christian tradition, we redirect them back to our heart's desire, who is Christ our Lord, either through the Jesus prayer or as John Cassian would pray, "Oh, God, come to my assistance. Oh, Lord, make haste to help me."

This not an accidental beginning of each office because we have done that in our hearts all day long, even before we get to office. Then when we say, Deus in adiutorium meum -- God, come to my assistance, in English -- we are back to, our thoughts. We lay them all up in prayer.

That's a short catechesis on thoughts, and how we manifest our thoughts. In practice, I don't know of anyone doing it today. I'm trying to recover it, because I think it's beneficial. For a group like us, I would recommend we would find a diad partner or triad partners, and the question would be, "Well, what is your heart's desire?" And just lay it out. If an affliction rises, such as, pain or suffering -- I can't listen because, I'm hurting because my mother's sick -- or something, just lay the thought out. It's received, and it goes away because the intention is to return to the presence of God in our midst. And then the next person would lay out their thoughts.

This takes no more than five or ten minutes. It's very brief. I would say do it sometime during the day. In the earliest tradition, they did it two or three times a week.

John Climacus talked about watching a monk in a certain tradition, I think it was upper Egypt, who had these little square books attached to his waistband, and would put his thoughts in them. It was the beginning of journal writing, a laying out of thoughts. As you lay them out, you let them go.

If we had more time, we could get into the anatomy of thought. It's quite systematic.

Any questions about this? It's spontaneous. It's what's in your heart, and you just lay them out.

Question? Yes.

**BC:** As I was listening to you yesterday, journaling is what came to my mind, I became aware that I'm not even honest with my journal at times. I seem to be screening what I put into my journal. And so I wondered what you would think about the idea of making your journal your partner.

**SR. MEG:** It would be excellent as long as it doesn't return to the self. In other words, the whole point would be to lay the self out, you would have to have a nonpublished audience in mind.

**LH:** Isn't this the essence of spiritual direction?

**SR. MEG:** This is the origin of spiritual direction. This is the beginning.

There is a marvelous book on this. It's by Irene Hausherr, and the reference would be one of those Cistercian studies. It's called, *Spiritual Direction in the East*, it's a huge book. It's hard to get, but tells the history of how this came into being and why it evaporated.

**MC:** Wouldn't you agree that this is one of the benefits of meditation; that you are just present and let thoughts rise and go, even watch them as they go, but don't deal with them?

**SR. MEG:** This is a benefit of meditation, you can see why it goes hand in hand, just to observe. That through awareness, self awareness dissipates. That's the freedom.

Freedom comes when you're just aware and you're not compelled.

Freedom comes when you're just aware and you're not compelled.

Yes?

**MML:** Are there ever any thoughts you want to hold onto. Or is it always true to let them go?

**SR. MEG:** When is a thought needing to be worked with? There was a little group of us at breakfast yesterday, and we talked about the difference between therapy and spirituality.

The answer is, you can work with it as long as the person you are working with has the same mind as you do, returning to your heart's desire and moving you beyond ego and self, we would say to God. Self growth in therapy isn't enough.

You can see that we have many topics here, but that's a nice long one. In general it's very clear that this manifestation of thoughts is not analysis. It really just laying them out. At its earliest, the word in -- I think it's Greek. Is *nepsis*. You are just watching thoughts come up.

You want to slow your brain and mind, to notice the thoughts origin. Analysis is too far down the road. The training is early detection, turns out to be preventative.

**RJH:** Do you know the book, "The Way of the Artist?"

**SR. MEG:** "The Way of the Artist," I have heard of it. I've not read it.

**RJH:** She talks in there about the morning pages for the artist. To block all the negative messages that you can't do this, that sort of thing. She says to write three pages every day, just write it without raising the pen. Would that be the manifestation of thoughts?

**SR. MEG:** Yes, that would be. But, there would need to be an intention to return to your heart's desire.

In order to be in the stream of this tradition, the focus in on the spirit, light, and humility rather than -- you can see it's very delicate -- rather than me becoming a good artist and creative. The intention would matter. The intention also frees you, if you don't have a goal, you don't have an outcome, that makes it a purer act. If you practice is focused on an outcome, then your practice is the outcome. It's contradictory.

This would fall on the Spirit, the will of God. If God wants a book to come out of it, great. But you, would not intentionally write a book in this practice.

Thank you very much.

## **Day 2**

**Sister Meg | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)**



**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 2 - Wednesday - April 30, 2003**  
**Rev. Kusala Bhikshu**

**Topics:**

What is Freedom

Is Ownership Real

Forgiveness and Acceptance

Patience

**REV. KUSALA:** I'd like to start off this morning with a reading. It's from a book called, "Teachings of the Buddha," by Jack Kornfield, and is a compilation of sayings, reflections, thoughts and ideas. This comes from a Buddhist text called the Samyutta Nikaya. It's entitled, "Soma and Mara."

*"Once the nun, Soma, having returned from her alms round and after her meal entered the woods for a noontime rest. Plunging into the depths of the woods, she sat under a tree.*

*When the tempter, Mara, desirous of arousing fear, wavering and dread in Soma, and wishing to cause her to interrupt her concentrated meditation, went up to her and said, "The goal is hard to reach, even for sages. It cannot be won by a woman with whatsoever wisdom she may have.*

*Then Soma thought: Who is this, a human or nonhuman? Who is saying this? Surely it is Mara, who wants to interrupt my concentrated meditation.*

*Knowing that it was Mara, she said to him, "What does one's gender matter to one whose mind is well composed, in whom insight is functioning, and who comprehends the Dharma?"*

*Then Mara thought: The nun, Soma, knows who I am. Being sad and sorrowful, he vanished then and there."*

I've chosen three topics for the morning session. The first is freedom, the second is ownership and nonattachment, and the third is forgiveness or acceptance.

**A few years ago I started looking into the idea of freedom.**

A few years ago I started looking into the idea of freedom. Am I really free? Do I have true freedom? Am I controlling my life, or is my life being controlled? What is ultimate freedom anyway?

I then reflected on freedom of choice. Do I have the freedom to choose? Or is my choice

based on... Do I want the red one, or blue one? Do I have the choice, of "No Choice?"

I have come to understand through the practice of meditation and following the precepts, that the freedom of a monk is really based, on the choice of no choice. Sounds strange doesn't it. That true freedom can come out of having no choice? Like holding the 227 precepts of an early Buddhist monk. Somehow, those precepts become 227 chances to be free. One day wisdom and compassion will take all our choices away, and we'll be left with enlightened intention, speech, and action, not-self and no choice.

So, how do we find freedom in renunciation? What holds us in bondage? Is it the things we own, the things we want, or the things we need?

I found myself sitting in the Zendo (meditation hall) on a hard, cold floor, quietly, looking for "No Choice." About ten minutes into my sitting both knees really started to hurt. I envisioned myself sitting with gangrene, and because of that, an ambulance would soon come to the Zendo and take me to the hospital. The doctor would say in a soft and comforting voice, "We have to amputate your leg, because you were sitting in meditation too long."

Wow, what a story my mind was making. I suddenly became aware Mara, the great tempter, was sitting on my shoulder and whispering in my ear, trying to scare me. (Mara is not a devil, but a manifestation of desire and craving). So, I said to Mara, "I'm going to sit here anyway. I'm going to choose not to have the choice to move." Weird isn't it, to choose no choice, very Zen in a way.

After a half hour of sitting quietly, I stretched my legs and the blood came back. I was able to stand and walk. I didn't have to go the hospital. I started to see the choice of no choice, had allowed me to sit with much more discomfort than ever before. No choice in a way, let me transcend my discomfort with no dire consequences.

Could I choose not to be comfortable and simply suffer, even when friends, family, body, and mind told me not to? Sometimes my spiritual journey is all about not choosing comfort.

**Freedom is never found in security  
\_\_\_ and seems to lie outside most of the comfort zones. \_\_\_**

Freedom is never found in security, and seems to lie outside most of the comfort zones.

I'd like to stop here and do a reading. This is something from the Dhammapada a famous Early Buddhist text. It's called, "Crossing the Stream."

*"Few cross over the river. Most are stranded on this side. On the riverbank they run up and down. But the wise person, following the way, crosses over beyond the reach of death.*

*Free from desire,  
Free from possessions,*

*Free from attachment and appetite,  
Following the seven lights of awakening,  
And rejoicing greatly in one's freedom,  
In this world the wise person  
Becomes oneself a light,  
Pure, shining free."*

Okay something about ownership and attachment. This is a tough one for me, because I like the stuff I have. I don't have much stuff, but that makes the stuff I have even more valuable to me.

Back in the 1980's I bought a brand new Opal Manta, \$3700. What a wonderful car -- flag blue, four-on-the-floor, my first new car. I was so happy, I'd drive to work every day and glow in the luxury of my new car.

Then one day I left my apartment to go to work, and found somebody had broken into my brand new car. The passenger window was shattered and the radio was gone.

I was confused. I was angry. I went over to my car, and I yelled, "Car, who owns you? Who owns you, car? Don't I own you? Aren't I making the payments? Aren't you mine?" I listened carefully for a response, but my car said nothing back.

It was a big insight: I didn't own my car. I was simply using it until somebody wanted it more than I did.

I thought about myself. Do I own me? Can I prevent my body from getting old? Can I prevent it from getting sick? Can I prevent it from dying? What part of me do I really own? Can I ever really have a perfect hair day?

As a monk with a shaved head, it seems I can have a perfect hair day.

**MC:** I'd say it's perfect.

**REV. KUSALA:** The problem with ownership is... It's an illusion! There is no one to own the stuff, and no stuff to be owned.

The Illusion of ownership causes much suffering. A better way to go through life, is with an open hand. Sometimes people give me things out of kindness and generosity. But things change, and those things I think I own, will always be taken away.

Every time I close our hand and try to own the things I use, I suffer.

Can I just walk through life with an open hand, receiving and giving without ever closing my hand? I think I can, but it takes a lot of practice. That's what I call true renunciation, never closing your hand or your heart.

Okay a little shift here.. What about forgiveness? You know, in Buddhism we don't really have forgiveness, it's more like acceptance. There is no **One** in Buddhism to forgive us, and there is no **One** to be forgiven. It's sad sometimes, it feels good to be forgiven, you sort of get off the hook. But Karma has no ears to hear, and no eyes to see.

A short story... A few years ago Father Gill from the LA Archdiocese and I were at a Los Angeles Buddhist/Catholic dialogue. I said to Father Gill, "Father Gill" -- and let me say now, he is a much wiser man than I -- "Father Gill, I don't believe we have forgiveness in Buddhism."

I felt so proud, I had found something to challenge him with, and make a Buddhist point. I said, "You know, the forgiver is up here, and the forgiven is down there. In Buddhism we don't have forgiveness; we have acceptance. Acceptance is much better, because it's a more equal playing field. There is equanimity in acceptance. There is no greater or lesser in acceptance.

Gosh, I felt so good about the point I had just made.

Father Gill said in a kind and forgiving tone, "Reverend Kusala, that's an interesting idea, but don't you think forgiveness and acceptance can do the very same thing?" I said, "But, what do they do, Father Gill? What does forgiveness and acceptance really do?"

Father Gill said, "Forgiveness and acceptance bring a relationship back into balance."

"Forgiveness brings a relationships back into balance," I said? "Yes, he said." "And acceptance does the same thing. It's all about balance."

Wow, I came to understand forgiveness and acceptance are pretty much the same, because of the balance they bring to the world. But now, is there a way practice acceptance?

Let me share a technique I use. I go to a busy grocery store, sometimes Von's, sometimes Ralph's, and I find the longest line. I may only have one or two items, but I stand there anyway, just waiting.

My first thoughts might might go something like this... This sure is a stupid thing to do, I could be doing a lot of other things right now. Then I get a little angry and a bit uncomfortable. That's when I start to practice 'patient endurance.' I'm enduring this line, my anger, and my discomfort because my goal is accept things without having to change them. Finally it's my turn to pay, and my practice is over.

I might go back the next day and find the longest line again, and keep doing it repeatedly until patient endurance finally turns into patience. Patience is the antidote to my anger.

    **Patience is the antidote to anger.**    

Now while I'm standing there being patient, I might even invite somebody to cut in front of

me. It will make my practice that much better. After practicing for awhile... Like a week, a month, or even a year, patience finally turns into acceptance. With acceptance I can stand in the longest line, forever.

At that moment, the world and I are exactly the way we're supposed to be. Eventually my acceptance turns into equanimity, a kind of elevated spiritual acceptance. In equanimity I have perfect balance. Mind and heart have come together in the present moment where all things are interconnected and empty of value.

Thank you for listening.

**SR. MEG:** Well, speaking of patient endurance, do you want to stand up for a moment while I get set up?

**REV. KUSALA:** I brought my harmonica with me today, and while Sister Meg is getting set up I'd like to play a tune for you.

Back in the old days when more blues guys lived in the country than in the city, they would hear a train, a steam engine, and replicate it on their harmonica. It's said, you can't be a real blues harmonica player until you can play the train. This is my interpretation of the train. All aboard.

(Rev. Kusala plays some Blues on his harmonica.)

**Day 2**

**Sister Meg | Rev. Kusala | Q & A**

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 2 - Wednesday - April 30, 2003**  
**Questions and Answers**

**Topics:**

[How Does a Catholic Die](#)

[How Does a Buddhist Die](#)

[The Difference Between Suicide and Dying in a State of Grace](#)

[A Visit to the Coroner's Office](#)

[Compassion and Loving-Kindness](#)

[Getting Ready for Death](#)

**REV. KUSALA:** Sr. Meg, a few months ago I was invited to St. Monica's Church in Santa Monica as a presenter on Buddhist meditation. It was an all day interreligious event.

After my presentation, I went to listen to a presentation on Thomas Merton. An older couple came up afterwards and said, "My husband has terminal cancer and is afraid to die, could you tell us how he is supposed to die."

Sister Meg, how does a Catholic die?

**Sister Meg, how does a Catholic die?**

**SR. MEG:** First of all, I want to thank you for the question of how does a Catholic die, or for that matter how does a Christian die. Because what they say is true, we die as we live. Death pulls together all that we practice, what we believe, and who we are.

Benedict says, keep that daily before your eyes. That's in the context of the Rule... We walk in the presence of God, always aware that God sees us, and we go from a kind of presence in faith, to a of presence in fact.

I have to live in a faith-filled way to make God part of my life, here and now.

I went to the hospital this past Sunday, to visit a woman I've known for over 40 years, a cousin by marriage who was dying of acute leukemia.

I asked her, "Are you at peace?"

She said, "Do you mean with dying?" I said, "Yes, are you at peace with dying?"

She said, "I've not thought about it. I buried my parents as you know, and I buried my uncle."

I said, "Yes, but what about yourself?"

She said, "Well, my grief now is for my sons and my husband. You know, my husband is totally helpless."

I said, "Yes, you're right on that. He has depended on you in business and relationship." So, we spent some time celebrating her marriage.

I asked her if she was afraid of letting go, and she shared her grief and fear. Then I said, "Well, where do you think you're going? Is it scary? What's it going to be like?"

She talked about God, and about her mother's faith, how her mother taught her to pray, and how she still does that practice of prayer even today.

I said, "Did you bring your rosary?" She said, "Oh, no, you know the boys never think of things like that." So I gave her one of mine.

I always carry two rosaries, so I can give one away. I've got more rosaries than you'll ever know. I get all my rosaries from the nuns who have died in the Hermitage. I only want the rosaries used by people of faith.

When I gave her the rosary and she said, "You know, I can't pray it anymore."

I said, "What do you pray?" We went through the prayer a few times and I said, "This is it, Elaina. This is the dying. You pray and you endure the few days you have left. I'll be around and we can have this conversation again."

It was really about her faith in God. She already had faith in her husband and her four boys.

Then I blessed her, we said a prayer, and I left.

**REV. KUSALA:** Thank you Sister Meg.

Buddhists believe the last thought of this lifetime, is the first thought of the next lifetime.

**Of all the many ways a Buddhist can die,  
\_\_\_\_here is one best case scenario of a patient dying in a hospital.\_\_\_\_**

Of all the many ways a Buddhist can die, here is one best case scenario of a patient dying in a hospital.

As he or she is lying in bed, close to death, a monk enters the room. The patient's eyes fall on the image of the monk, he remembers the Buddha and his qualities. The Buddha was a person, who through his own effort and volition found the answer to suffering, attained perfect wisdom and gained great compassion. These ideas would circulate through the mind of the patient.

Next, the monk would light some incense. The smell would remind the patient of all the times he had gone to the temple to practice and listen to the Dharma. The Dharma in this

case would be the ultimate truth found in Buddhism. The patient's mind would be filled with thoughts of Dharma.

Like the Catholic rosary, Buddhist's have a string of 108 beads called a Mala. The monk would place the mala in the patient's hand. The patient would recall all the years of Buddhist recitation and chanting he did with his mala. The body is now touching the Dharma.

In the early Buddhist tradition of Theravada, the monk would begin chanting from a Buddhist text. He is chanting the sutras, the talks and blessings of the Buddha. The ear would be filled with the sound of Dharma.

The monk would encourage the patient to turn his heart and mind away from his loved ones, his parents, wife, children, and friends. To turn away from thoughts of his job, car, house, and hobbies. Away from this unsatisfactory existence filled with pain and suffering. To turn away and not be distracted by grief, sadness, anger, or confusion. To let go of all things, forever in this world.

There is no one to save him now, his only refuge is the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The blessings offered by the Buddhist monk encourages acceptance of death, and future rebirth.

As the patient takes his last breath, the monk encourages him to watch and be mindful.

**MD:** On a personal note, my father was dying, and my family went back to see him. My sister and I spent a whole night's vigil with my father who was in a coma, we said Psalms together. It was reminiscent of what you are talking about here, you know, the senses. We touched him a lot, and we scratched him a lot. He was dying of liver cancer, and he itched.

But the ironic thing was, he didn't die that night, even though the doctor was sure he would. We waited two or three more days, but he died alone, after all our vigils with him. We had gone home for lunch, and he died all alone. There was a lot of grief about that.

We tried so hard to be with him, and at the end he was alone.

A dear nun friend of mine said to me later, "He was beyond you at that point, and with God." From a Christian perspective I believe there comes a point, by the grace of God perhaps, when letting go becomes possible for a person of faith.

Perhaps he didn't even want us there. Perhaps his letting go had already happened. I'm not sure, but it comforts me to think so.

**REV. KUSALA:** I think even if we're surrounded with friends and family, we still die alone.

A story comes to mind about Abraham Lincoln.. It's said he gave a good speech to a rather large audience. After the speech he sat down crying. His wife leaned over and said, "Why are you crying? It was a wonderful speech, Abe."

Abraham Lincoln said, "Because I looked out into the audience and realized, in a hundred years we're all going to be dead."

**LH:** I appreciate the fact that you talk about the transition from life into death, and I think



we so often forget that; that it's not just life and death, but there is a space in between, and a lot more occurs in that transitory space.

I'm reminded that it parallels the birth process, because birth is not always smooth and easy, for the mother or the child. That helps me keep the perspective of death in mind.

There is a space of time between life and death, and birth and life even if it's just a split second.

**REV. KUSALA:** There is also a space between each breath.

**CEE:** I felt that both your presentations were very moving, but you were really saying the same thing. Manifesting love and compassion to the person who was dying.

I think when Jesus died he said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." And instead of just letting go, the love that you were talking about manifested in that moment, and he went into love.

I'm so grateful that both of you have the kind of compassion that can be expressed in this way. I think it's Christian, whether you call it that, or not.

**SR. MEG:** I'd like to point out the difference between suicide and dying in a state of grace. It's about offering: "Into your hand I commend." It's really about making an offering, a kind of sacrifice. It's a joining with the universe. It's a handing over.

There is a very fine line, between the two especially with older people, because a lot of elderly die depressed. Clergy can help them through this period, so they can give consent to the offering of love.

One quick story. When I was a superior, we had a lot of elderly nuns. I buried thirteen of them in those eight years.

That night we had a chapter meeting, and the next morning everybody went to prayers. I was downstairs drinking a cup of coffee. When one of the nuns said, "You know, Sr. Joanie didn't come to prayers this morning."

\_\_\_ **"You know, Sr. Joanie didn't come to prayers this morning?"** \_\_\_

I went up to her room, and the door was locked; so I went downstairs to get the key. When I opened the door there she was, her name was Joan and she was seventy-six years old. Her blue eyes were wide open, and she had this huge smile on her face. Her hair was flung back beautifully and the covers on the bed were perfect, couldn't have made them nicer myself. Her hands were open palms up, and there was this wonderful smell in the room. I just stood there in amazement.

Since I've had that experience, it's hard to be afraid of death. I've seen hard deaths, but when you see somebody taken like that, well it just doesn't seem all that bad!

We paged the other nuns... They came to her room, we said prayers and closed her eyes. It's funny she really wasn't a holy nun, she kept saying "damn" and "hell" all the time.

**LH:** What you are saying reminds me about how judgmental I can be; that we judge who is holy and who is not. It seems to me, we all have an interior life that people never see.

**SR. MEG:** But that's our purification, to just accept what's arising and notice it. We need tools to put those arising's aside, we're so conditioned. It's all about training the mind! I found it in the Christian tradition, but I learned it first in the Buddhist tradition. We've got the tools in our own tradition to redirect our thoughts away from our motivations, inclinations, intentions, and back to our hearts.

Kusala, have you been at the bedside of anyone, at the moment of death?

**REV. KUSALA:** No, never at the moment or death.

**\_\_\_I got a call from a palliative care nurse about a fellow named George.\_\_\_**

The last person I helped die, was a patient in a Veterans Administration hospital in West Los Angeles.

I got a call from a palliative care nurse about a fellow named George. He didn't have many friends and his family lived out of state. He had been coming to my meditation classes for about three years.

I went to see George and brought some stuff to help him die as a Buddhist. The first thing I did, was turn off the TV in his room.

**CEE:** Good.

**REV. KUSALA:** The last thing you want to do, is die with a Ford commercial in your head.

I brought some Buddhist chanting tapes and a picture of Quan Yin Bodhisattva. She is similar in a lot of ways to the Virgin Mary. The picture and chanting tapes helped to make his space in the hospital scared.

The palliative care nurses asked if I could find a picture of George in his youth so the nurses could see what he used to look like before the cancer. George at that point was in pretty bad shape. Towards the end, George couldn't even talk. He would respond by jerking his body.

We would practice meditation in his room. Over the years George and I had talked about an inner light that appeared in deep states of tranquility meditation. In Buddhism inner light doesn't have any special significance, but it does seem to generate a kind of peace and serenity. I encouraged George to think of the light, as the doorway to his next lifetime.

The last time I saw George he was pretty close to death. A few hours after that visit, a palliative care nurse called and said I didn't have to come back the next day, George had passed away.

**MGC:** When Father Bede was here, I had some wonderful moments with him -- he told me the most important thing was discernment, and that's what we were talking about here.

But the other thing he always said was, we must continually go beyond. It's all the

mystery, as far as I'm concerned.

I just think we go beyond even in death. We are continually going into the mystery, whatever the mystery is. From that point of view, you could be a Buddhist or a Christian.

**RVM:** Well, I don't know what to say at this point, but I was deeply moved by what Sister Meg and Kusala just said. You both gave me so much instruction.

My brother died in October. We didn't know what to do. We didn't expect him to die. We couldn't get our minds around it. To this day, every time my sisters and I meet we are still trying to find closure.

Sister Meg and Kusala, thank you. It really got to my heart.

You know, I still can't believe my brother is gone. He was so young. There was nothing we could do, and we just -- we weren't expecting it at all, not at all. We got a phone call at nine o'clock, "Come. He's going to die. He doesn't have long."

It was -- I don't know what to say, but thank you. I have some tools for the next time. The questions that still bother me are... Was he ready? How did he feel about the Lord or whatever? We knew he believed in God, but was he ready? How was he going to -- I can't even say it. I'm sorry.

**MML:** I have a question, well it's more of a question-question.

I wonder if the two of you could speak about the connection that we have -- I don't know what kind of words you would use -- the connection that we're looking for in life that continues, something about connection.

**REV. KUSALA:** Connection in life?

**MML:** Well, you talked about connection. You said if we were mediators we connect in silence, Buddhists in suffering, and Christians in God.

Is there a connection that goes beyond death? I guess I don't even have the words, what would you two offer?

**REV. KUSALA:** I'll offer a story. A few months ago, because of my work as a volunteer police chaplain, I was invited to go to the Orange County coroner's office.

[I was invited to go to the Orange County coroner's office.](#)

You know, Death is really the last great secret. Nobody wants us to see dead people. If you called the coroner's office tomorrow and said, "Can I come and see dead people today?" They would say, "No, I'm sorry, nobody gets to see dead people without a pass."

How lucky was I, and the other twelve chaplains, to be able to see dead people in the Orange County's coroner's office. The Baptist Chaplain for some reason brought muffins and coffee for afterwards. I was thinking it might be part of their spiritual tradition.

My first insight was... What a miracle life is, because when the life energy goes, this body

we spend some much time in, and are so attached too, is absolutely worthless. It doesn't even make a good doorstep, because it smells.

During the tour I found myself in a large room with a bunch of desks, this is where the deputy coroners do their work. One deputy corner had pictures of her children on the desk and a little sign that said, "I see dead people." I thought to myself, it must be from the movie "The Sixth Sense." Even in the midst of all this death, humor was alive and well.

Now, I'm standing at the back of the room listening to the presentation, and someone gently touches my shoulder to get my attention; I turn around, and there is no one within ten feet of me. I look around the room and I start to notice a kind of spiritual density, sort of like a hot humid day in the South. "There is something after death," I say to myself, "And I'm in its presence."

A lot of the dead folks I saw that day probably didn't think to much about their own death. They probley never went to their church, or temple, or whatever, and asked, "How am I supposed to die." Then, all of a sudden their bodies dropped, and they didn't know what to do?

So I'm thinking... This strange person -- the coroner -- comes a takes their body, and with nothing better to do, they end up following it back to the coroner's office, hoping to find a new home. Big problem, half the homes are occupied and the other half aren't renting.

Because I'm the Buddhist chaplain, and a bit different from the other chaplains in the police department, I raise my hand as we're eating our muffins and drinking our coffee. I say to the deputy coroner in charge of our tour, "Do you find this to be a very spiritual place?"

He said, "This is the most spiritual place I have ever worked. I've been here two years, and the energy here, well you can almost touch it. It is constantly changing, and we can't point our finger at any one thing and say that's the reason."

So now, I'm thinking, the one thing we all have in common is an afterlife of some kind. You know, even an atheist has an afterlife, it's called cryogenics.

**KS:** I want to venture a comment, but I'll probably get in trouble for it. I'm an architect, I think materialism comes in buildings, what I see in the event of a vessels is timelessness.

Here we are in a room that will transcend us all, it's already transcended some significant people who were here before. I feel a great sense of presence which is beyond life through people like George MacLeod, and Phillip Newall, in some ways they are still here.

The artifacts of human achievement, which are these buildings, extend our participation. But they all have time limits, regardless of how special they are.

I really do think the spirit can be present beyond death, and that we can know that connection through past experience.

**SR. MEG:** Let me pick up on that, because I think it's a critical point, you are very astute.

There are two things and their presence is without a doubt. There are many realms, and some people don't move on, and some people don't. When a nun dies in the monastery, we

used to pray for her soul, now we are asking her for favors. It's based on experience. We tend to get a big favor from them after they die.

When I go up to the casket of a sister I've lived with, I might say, "Sister Helen, you know," and I'll say something she knows, and then I'll say, "Can you help me with that?" And I get help. There really is an intercessory thing happening.

Meditation practice and cultivating our religious way of life, sharpens our spiritual awareness. There is no doubt in my mind, this is so. But we experience these subtle spirits only in presence, not in form. As we open our hearts through these practices, what arises is a true spiritual experience.

It's like taste, sound, smell, but it's as if -- **JO** do you mind talking a little bit about your mother?

**JO:** You mean, what I just shared with you today?

**SR. MEG:** Yes.

**JO:** Well, I was with my beautiful mother when she made her transition, and the room was filled with light. I'd never seen so much light from a human being.

My father died in an accident so I wasn't with him, but I was with my mother. Her face was so radiant, so beautiful. There was this light, and all I could think of was Moses in Exodus saying that those who see God will die because they can't bear the light. So maybe in the next world, we will be able to bear the light.

**SR. MEG:** That shifts the whole burden, about how her mom was, through seeing the light. It seems, you weren't angry with your mother. You weren't worried about your mother. Because, you saw her light and how beautiful it was.

**KM:** I've been wondering, what is the role of love in the transition from life to afterlife, and in feeling the spirits and presence of others? I feel very comfortable in a Christian tradition thinking that God's love is the essence of everything, and so you are just going from the human shadow of it, to the real thing.

I wonder, in the Buddhist tradition -- it seems to me that both of you in helping people with death were very loving, and referred to it as compassion. But do you use that word, love, in relating to other people?

**REV. KUSALA:** Not really, the word we use is loving-kindness. Compassion is the activity created by the minds intention of loving-kindness.

**\_\_\_Compassion is the activity created by the minds intention of loving-kindness.\_\_\_**

Again, love is a simple word with a very complicated definition. It's applicable to shoes, and cars, and God, and house, and job.

Buddhists consider most forms of love to be sort of mundane until it's connected with kindness. When love and kindness are connected it becomes unconditional. Conditional love is so full of attachment; when you compare it to the unconditional love of loving-kindness.

Our practice pretty much determines our response to situations. If our practice has enabled heart and mind... Compassion and wisdom to be present, our activity becomes pretty skillful. But, I don't know if you could call it love.

**KM:** So you don't necessarily think a person is going "Into Love" as they die?

**REV. KUSALA:** We hope they go to heaven or Nirvana, rather than into into love.

**SR. MEG:** There is a difference. They're different realms?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, there are different realms. An easy way to understand the different realms of afterlife found in Buddhism is the through something called the "Six Realms of Existence" model.

### \_\_\_the "Six Realms of Existence"\_\_\_

The first realm is heaven. It's perfect. It's just like Christian heaven in some ways. The main problem with the Buddhist heaven is, it's impermanent. You can't stay there forever.

The second heaven realm is filled with desire. I call this the Donald Trump heaven. If only you had one more building, or one more wife this would be a perfect heaven.

The third realm of existence is the human realm. It's the only place we can achieve Nirvana, the end of suffering. Nirvana can't be had in heaven because everything is so perfect there is no reason to practice. Nirvana is impossible to achieve in hell, because everything is so bad all we do is suffer. The human realm gives us a little bit of pleasure, and a little bit of pain and discomfort, it keeps us honest and practicing.

The first hell realm is called the animal realm. It's often described as always wanting to eat, always wanting to sleep, always wanting to have sex, and being totally confused. Which sort of describes me when I was teenager.

The next hell realm is called the hungry ghost realm. In this hell realm you have a very small mouth, and a really big stomach. No matter how much food you put in that little mouth, your stomach is never full.

Finally, we come to the worst hell realm of all, and yet it looks pretty normal. You'll be walking through a forest, and all of a sudden all the leaves turn into razor blades and fall off the tree, and they cut you into million pieces. You cry out in pain, and your karmic energy is resurrected into another hell body, so you can be killed again, and again, and again.

Eventually, when all that suffering purifies the karma that put you in hell, you are reborn into a higher realm.

This in a nut shell, is Buddhist heaven and hell.

I was asked earlier, how I knew for sure these realms really exist. Well, it's not my job to say whether afterlife is real or unreal. My job is to explain Buddhist afterlife, according to Buddhism and the teaching's of the Buddha.

Nirvana is really the Buddhist goal, not heaven. Nirvana is the end of existence and nonexistence at exactly the same time. It goes beyond afterlife.

The Buddha said all forms of existence lead to suffering, even heaven for a Buddhist, because you have to leave sooner or later.

This existence and nonexistence at the same time is really hard understand because it's non-dual. This is how I explain it. You have this coin, one side of the coin is nihilism, the other side externalism, the coin itself is Nirvana. When a Buddhist achieves Nirvana, he gets the coin.

A point of interest... In Buddhism heaven is up and hell is down, go figure.

**CEE:** Coming back to love, when you started talking about distinctions in love, in the Greek New Testament, I believe there are three words for love instead of one: Eros, which is attraction, sexual attraction but probably much more than that, attachment to things.

And then filia is human love. It means brotherly love.

The Christian term is agape, which was invented, or which I heard was a very obscure word that came into the New Testament to describe another indescribable-in-any-other-way kind of love, which is the center of Christ in the New Testament Christian belief.

**REV. KUSALA:** That's interesting.

**KP:** Craig, isn't that the word that's sometimes translated as charity? Is that the one?

**CEE:** Yes. And just think the way the word, charity, has changed -- suffereth long, is kind, the wonderful description of St. Paul. And it came in English to mean giving to the poor. Love is a slippery word.

**PDP:** There is another Greek word that's mentioned, too, and it's mother love, so there is a fourth dimension to it.

**CEE:** Could you give it to us?

**PDP:** I want to say stoma, but that's not right.

**MGC:** C.S. Lewis wrote the book The Four Loves, and those are the four loves.

\_\_\_\_**Sometimes I hear the Buddhists talk about emptiness instead of love.**\_\_\_\_

**SR. MEG:** Kusala, sometimes I hear the Buddhists talk about emptiness instead of love. Can you translate that? Because, it sounds like emptiness is love. How can they be the same thing?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, difficult to understand how they might be the same thing. I really think they're different. Emptiness in Buddhism is known as Sunyata in Sanskrit, and Anatta in Pali. Sunyata means having no original essence, and Anatta means having no soul or 'not self.' My definition of emptiness is... Understanding through a direct experience, that all things are interconnected and interdependent. That nothing can exist separately. There

is no 'one thing,' ever. There is only process. Emptiness in Buddhism means, empty of independent existence.

**SR. MEG:** So, is that death?

**REV. KUSALA:** That's ego death.

**SR. MEG:** Ego death?

**REV. KUSALA:** Ego is the thing that keeps us separate. When the ego is anesthetized through meditation or spiritual practice, we can reconnect to the world around us in a very special way. I call that connection Enlightenment. When ego is missing, so is the illusion of oneness. This 'unity of diversity' is the ultimate reality found in Buddhist emptiness.

When the ultimate reality of the "unity of diversity" is directly experienced, the great compassion arises from the heart. The heart is forever broken, and cannot be mended. If one person is dying, starving, or homeless, there is a part of you that is dying, starving, and homeless. Service to others, the Bodhisattva ideal, springs out of this ultimate reality of unity and the great compassion.

When I am helping someone die, in a very real sense, I am dying with them.

**SR. MEG:** It seems to me there is a large group of people attracted to mystery and undifferentiated transcendence or even eminence. There is another group that finds more at-homeness with love and a personal God and/or a face, Jesus, through Mary, a more beloved or a betrothal mysticism compared to -- this is considered apophatic.

Apophatic is mystery. Kataphatic is more going through the images and feelings. They are both good, but they are mutually exclusive. But, some people can access both in their lifetime.

When I find somebody that is totally into the mystery, they'll catch that the word "emptiness" is just as good as the word "love."

The people that are totally more into a mystical sense with our Lord in this more personal presence through the Trinity but the human Jesus that swept us up into the Spirit and the Father, that's much more personal.

And so I think there are two major ways of going in spiritual direction, again. It's good to know those two major divides, and they are in all the religions, and then there is distinctions within that. But Buddhism as such is pretty much the mystery, the apophatic, the emptiness. And then some of the Tibetans have these other realms that are more of the personal, but they are alien to the Zen people, right?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, and the Theravada.

**SR. MEG:** And the Theravada.

I was at the Abbey of Gethsemani with the Dalai Lama, and we were going through the chapel into the scholas.

We believe that Jesus's presence is in the Blessed Sacrament, so all of us were going by



and bowing to the Tabernacle. Now, I didn't see this myself, but one of the monks told me that the Dalai Lama stopped, looked around, and went (indicating "high five" gesture).

**JO:** It is said that Voltaire, who claimed to be an atheist, was standing when a funeral cortege went past, and he tipped his hat. And his friend said, "I thought you didn't believe."

Voltaire said, "I'm speaking to an acquaintance."

**SR. MEG:** Speaking to an acquaintance, well there is some explanation.

**In getting ready for death, it's important to know how to approach it.**

I think in getting ready for death, it's important to know how to approach it. Is it through emptiness and mystery, or is it through the Lord and in connection with love? I'm certain there is a transcendent experience that puts it all together.

When I interview a person one-on-one, I try to find the doorway to their heart. That can put you in touch with their sentiments, the way they experience mystery. Is it through a personal God, or is it more through a mystery, an emptiness, an apophatic?

We have these books at the convent called the "Dead Books." They have a gray binder, and in them is the Office of the Dead. All the prayers we say to a nun who is dying.

You might be resting and get a knock at your door, someone says so and so is dying.

Well, we all get our gray books and go down to be with the nun, we may end up singing all night long. We always make sure that the real good singers get out of bed. If there are too many of us to fit into a room, we take turns.

There is nothing more beautiful than to hear the Psalms being chanted. In a way every time we chant the Psalms, it's like getting ready for our own deaths.

One nun recently didn't die, even after singing the Psalms all night long. She insisted on three performances.

**JO:** Are these special songs that you are singing?

**SR. MEG:** They are just the Office and Psalms and hymns, and we have a list of readings from the Old Testament, and New Testament. It takes us about an hour to do them. We know a lot of them by heart.

**BC:** That puts me in mind of something I read in Benedict's Dharma when the Buddhists were talking about forgiveness, and they had a ceremony where they would confess to one another the faults of the day.

I think somebody asked them the question about, well, who are you asking forgiveness from?

This person in the book was describing it as the teacher, the lineage of teachers, those who had been faithful or had found the path, kind of going back to the person before them and the person before them. It made me think of this idea of this great cloud of witnesses that

we sometimes speak of being surrounded by angels and archangels or some kind of larger communion that transcends death, transcends our lives. I just wondered if the two of you have a response to that? Does that ring true for you, or is that just a different concept?

**REV. KUSALA:** In a more traditional setting, than the one I live in, there is a monthly full moon ceremony. All the monks gather in one place and the nuns would gather separately, they would start with the recitation of precepts, and then there is a question and answer period. Monks don't have to proclaim themselves as having broken the precepts. The other monks would do that for them. Then the head monk might say, "Is that true, Kusala? Did you break that precept?"

And I'd say, "Well, yes, but..." And then the head monk might say, "For the next week you'll eat last, this will give you time to reflect on your unskillfulness."

It isn't punishment. It's really a kind of 'time out,' a chance to reflect on your practice. It's said that you don't really break the precepts... The precepts defeat you.

When I was a volunteer at Los Angeles County state prison for men, I put together a purification ceremony for the Buddhist prisoners. It consisted of meditation and chanting, the purpose was to purify all past intentions, speech and action; their karma from many past lifetimes as well as this lifetime.

The big question from them was, who the heck were we talking to.

We don't have a God or a divine law giver, but we do have a lineage that goes all the way back to the Buddha. I've often thought real forgiveness starts with me forgiving myself. Then I ask friends and family, strangers and enemies, for forgiveness. And finally all the Dharma protectors, Buddha's, and Bodhisattvas that have ever lived and ever will live. In a way, it starts with forgiving my ignorance and ends with my accepting enlightenment.

The practice of asking for forgiveness is a practice of the heart. The Buddha said, our entire world exists in this fathom long body. If I can change my heart, I am changing the world and everything in it.

**MC:** I just wanted to react to what you said about the apophatic and kataphatic. The apophatic is mystery, and the kataphatic is personal God, and that the love is there.

You know, one of our greatest Christians is William Johnston, a Jesuit priest who lived the last half of his life in Tokyo, and was a Zen practitioner. He has written the best edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that I've ever read, and he distinguishes apophatic and kataphatic. My feeling is everything you said is correct except that love can be in the mystery as well as in the kataphatic.

**SR. MEG:** Right. It's just it's undifferentiated.

**MC:** Yes, but it's still a sense of mysterious love.

**SR. MEG:** Right. Good. Thank you.

**KS:** Two years ago we went to St. Meinrad where the monks who chanted last night came from. At one point I felt a tremendous sense of death. In their cemetery, they are all lined up in order. And as they die, their stones turn dark from time, so you can see the clean, recently chiseled stones, and the old dark ones. The most recent deaths have black

crosses, they are moving in a constant march, in this open square.

I found it very moving because I felt in talking with them, they had a sense of time on earth, and the door of death.

**PDP:** Where was that?

**SR. MEG:** St. Meinrad.

I've been to their funerals. They are like Buddhist funerals in that the guy is just on a slab, and they throw the dirt right on the body. Wait, I think at Gethsemani it's right on the body, but they put a lid on at Meinrad's. How do you bury people?

**REV. KUSALA:** In a variety of ways, but cremation seems to be the most popular. My teacher was cremated, but then again some choose burial.

He sent me a picture in an email of his teacher in a casket.

**SR. MEG:** Kusala sent me a picture in an email of his teacher in a casket, it's the first one I had ever seen. I was glad because I knew him, it made me feel closer.

**REV. KUSALA:** I felt comfortable in sending the picture. But, I think it probably surprised some people.

The morning he died, one of the monks from his residence came over and said, "Your teacher just died. Would you like to see him?" I went over to see the body, and took my camera.

Even in his last breath he was courteous. He had himself all fixed up so nobody had to do anything. His hands were folded, and the sheets and covers were placed just so. It was like he was saying, I don't want anybody to work any harder than they have to.

I took some pictures, and sent them by e-mail to a few people. Some folks were really surprised when they received a picture of my dead teacher, but in Buddhism death is just another part of life. Everything that is born has to die. It's not a big surprise to die, but maybe to get a picture of it in your e-mail is.

He was cremated, I have a pictures of him in the casket and then being pushed into the fire, with all the monks chanting, it was a wonderful ceremony. Life goes on, but so does death.

Shasta Abbey, a monastery in Northern California, buries their monks, right out in back. They have a cemetery for their pets too.

When you approach Shasta Abbey by car, there is a wire fence that surrounds the whole place, and up in one of the corners of the fence, is a little sign that says "Cemetery." I sort of like that, because when you go to Shasta Abbey as a monk, you really are going to a cemetery, in a sense. When you check in at Shasta Abbey, you don't check out. Talk about commitment.

Day 2

**Sister Meg | Rev. Kusala | Q & A**

\_\_\_**Day 3 - Thursday - May 1, 2003**\_\_\_

**Day Three...**

**Topics:**

**Sister Meg** - Monastic Way of Life, Community is Not Optional, Accountability and Obedience, Ritual, Prayer, and Work, Being Celibate.

**Rev. Kusala** - The five precepts, Buddhist Meditation, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness, and Not-Self.

**Q&A** - Extrasensory Perception, Balance and the Middle Way, Not-Self and Ego, Jesus Christ/Human, Christianity and Suffering, Rebirth or Reincarnation, Inter-religious Dialogue.

**[Sister Meg](#) | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)**

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 3 - Thursday - May 1, 2003**  
**Sister Mary (Meg) Margaret**

**Topics:**

Monastic Way of Life  
Community is Not Optional  
Accountability and Obedience  
Being Celibate

**SR. MEG:** My presentation this morning will be on the monastic way of life. And if you'll allow me to hint towards a comparison, my way of life is with form in a monastery. As a layperson your monastic way of life is without form in your marriage, in your home, in your workplace. And as Friends of Benedict, we're both following the same Rule. What I thought I would do is talk about how that Rule works in the monastic way of life, and what is the place of the vows. If you don't take vows with form, what are vows without form.

Another way of introducing this would be to say, what people see of us is above the river, they see me in the monastery at Beech Grove with a very set life. You know, prayers, much like what you're doing this week, morning, noon, evening prayer, Eucharist every day, common meals, common silence, common work.

There are other women's communities like the Trappistines that have more form; nobody works outside the monastery. Whereas, in my house, we have 40-some cars -- that may tell you something -- for 84 women. But we still have much form.

Now what do people do, when they do it is under the river. You and I both know there are people that live in a monastery, but under the river have lost the meaning or the intention of their practice. There are people that live above the river but are intensely living a contemplative way of life.

Let me talk about what are we doing under the river when we live the monastic way of life. I'm going to walk you through the door of *conversatio morum*, conversion to the monastic way of life.

It's C-O-N-V-E-R-S-A-T-I-O *morum* as opposed to *conversio morum*, C-O-N-V-E-R-S-I-O. *Conversio* means you have a conversion, and then you change your life. That works for about the first ten minutes, but you need an ongoing conversion. That is where our practice comes in to sustain our conversion. Our practice is to live life as a contemplative, as a monastic.

What is that way of life? That way of life is living in a monastery, the same monastery your whole life, under an abbot and the rule.

Let me first take on the vow of stability. Benedict in the first chapter talked about various kinds of monks. I think if he were sitting here today, he would say there is a fifth kind of monk, and it would be the Friends of Benedict.

The first kind was hermits, and most of us are not hermits.

The second kind are wandering monks that go from place to place. He was critical of them, he felt they had lost their fervor and had no accountability.

A third kind were monks that cluster together, like-minded souls, but they bound together in tepidity. They were folks that followed their own will.

He said he was writing this rule for cenobites, cenobitic monks who lived in common, lived in common under an abbot. This kind of common life in the Christian tradition is essential because the Christian way is ecclesial. Breaking bread together at the table is as important symbol of unity as is the word of God in scripture, or as is even Christ himself.

Christ gathered people and considered his way the way of people, the way of ecclesial people dedicated to following his way of life to the Father.

**\_\_\_So, being in community is not optional.\_\_\_**

So, being in community is not optional. It is constitutive; it's part of being a Christian.

Should you be a hermit, you would still do it in the name of all Christians and be doing it for the sake of all Christians. No one ever can isolate themselves from the community.

The first form is stability. You'll have to translate that for yourself, but it does have something to do with place. It's not just time. It does mean your feet have to be on the ground someplace. It is where you are.

Benedict was very critical of people always being someplace else and never being rooted where they are. So, place is first.

For me, over these many years of being in the same place, the benefit is this ongoing conversion, because they've watched me grow up in my community, and they've called me forth, and they've held me when I've had some harder years.

The second part of this is to be under an abbot, under someone you have given permission to call you to accountability, someone whom you are obedient to. Many writers say that Benedict's main vow was obedience.

We don't take a vow of celibacy, nor do we take a vow of poverty. But this obedience to the abbot has in it all the prescriptions of our goods and our body and our way of life. So, obedience is a sine qua non, which means that without which it would not be. So, obedience is essential.

My obedience is expressed to my prioress, Sr. Carol, we meet on a monthly basis, and I bring to her my accountability. I have a calendar, and I have a list of permissions I need, and I have a list of things that I'm always accountable for: My finances, money that has come in, the gifts I've given or gotten.

Before I go into things, I want to talk about this relationship with somebody whom you give authority to. It's very similar I think to marriage because you are doing it together, and you are no longer a free agent. You are in relationship for life. Some people do it through prayer, but there is a need as humans to be accountable and to give permission.

**\_\_\_Some people do it through prayer\_\_\_**

Do you have too much? Too little?

This accountability and obedience is a way to listen. I'm accountable to my sisters in community. I listen to them, and they listen to me. It's can be as a group in our chapter meetings. There is much to learn in a group, and there is much to learn individually with my sisters.

I would say over the years what I've learned is to love them, especially the older ones. They are just so wise, and they've become so human, and so dear.

I watch the younger ones come in, and it takes them a while to realize that we're not caring for the older sisters. Truly it's inter-generational living. We are not just sitting at that table to help somebody. It's a mutual assistance, and everyone is a peer, there is no one better than or more than. We certainly are all unique, but we live in community.

So, obedience is mutual, it's individual, and there is a total willingness to live with accountability.

I'm accountable for my things, here is where the vow of poverty comes in. I've taken a vow of total renunciation, which means not to own anything, and not to even have the possibility of owning anything. Should I inherit something, it would immediately go to the monastery. This vow of total renunciation means that everything is for my use, but I own nothing because I've renounced owning, I only want God. For the sake of God, it's easier to live without things.

How do I get things? How do I use things? I use them with permission. So, that brings me back to obedience.

Obedience is the way in which I get authorized to have a musical instrument. Believe it or not, I just got this one. (Indicating her flute.) Isn't it a honey? This is from Israel. It's rosewood, and it's the best one I've ever had. I haven't even broken it in yet.

But I couldn't use it without having the blessing of obedience, because it's not really mine. I don't want my things because then my intention starts returning back to me, and I'm in a



vowed life, a monastic way of life. If I keep grasping and taking it back, it takes me away from my renunciation, I need permission to use things.

The five ways of using things: I get permission to use things. I have no entitlement coming to me in the future. I renounce anything in the past that I have had or could have had. Any thoughts of either future things or past things, I renounce. I also renounce anything that I have that I may have needed in previous work but don't need any longer. I hand those in. I turn them in for the common good of community.

I think the fifth thing is to use things as the blessings of the altar. I'm going to stop here and say that the actual living of the monastic way of life under the river is really a ritual. It's a ritual action. I believe literally that my prioress is as if Christ. So, when I go in to her and ask her for the things that I use, I'm asking Christ.

When I'm playing with things, I'm playing like I would in church. When I walk into the refectory I bow and I sit down, it's as if I'm up in chapel at the Eucharist. When I'm up at Eucharist, I'm as if I'm with the community of other believers; that they are Christ; the priest is Christ. There is nothing other than Christ for my consciousness.

When I start thinking, feeling sorry for myself, getting into fatigue, depression, whatever, I return to the ritual. The ritual brings me out of it.

It took me about 30 years to really get into my bone marrow, when I'm in the world it's the same. I see no difference eating with you in your refectory than I do in mine. I see no difference playing this tune here for you as I would at the monastery chapel. I see no difference picking flowers with Jane as I would picking them at home.

**\_\_\_The ritual, then, makes the work your prayer, and your prayer the work.\_\_\_**

The ritual, then, makes the work your prayer, and your prayer the work. That's why it's so important to punctuate our life with this prayer of the Psalms, washing over three times a day. It anoints the ceaseless prayer that's going on in my heart all the time.

I'm going to take on, though, chastity. How does that play itself out under the river. Well, I am a celibate nun, and that means I made a choice with my sexuality.

Many people are continent, which means just no sex. That means they just don't have the opportunity to have sex, or sex isn't what they are into right now. A lot of people are continent. But at some point in our life we are called from the inside, to make a choice about our sexuality, either toward marriage, monastic life, or single life. That choice governs our vocation, what we do with our bodies. I chose to be a celibate monastic, that was the easy part. I did that in 1961.

The harder part is the choice to be chaste. Chaste covers my thoughts, and that means I have to be chaste in thought, word, and deed, but it starts in my heart, and then my mind. When the sexual thoughts and energies rise, I have to dash them against my spouse, Christ, and say, "Here. I'm just feeling my woman's feelings. Take them, just take them.

You gave them to me. Help me use them in the service of Apostolic love."

There is no alternative for me to express my physical sexuality either in friendship, or in homosexual, or heterosexual ways. Maybe a light love of affection, but absolutely no sexual innuendo or sexual direction.

The sexual urges are very strong. In fact, they are stronger in a monastic celibate because we've refrained, sometimes we're surprised by our energies. The young nuns, wow, you should see, they are so surprised, and some of the older nuns, too.

You know, we have a facility at the Hermitage which is 120 lay elderly people that we serve. And when our sisters can no longer serve -- fourteen of us work over there, it's like an extension of our monastery. Once in a while we'll have some sisters there, and they'll share a room, let's say, with a lay person. They can actually fall in love with the person because they've never been with a lay person. They don't understand their feelings, or where they came from.

Believe me, if you are thinking sexual desire dies, it never dies. That's what I'm learning. I've gotten used to just expecting it.

**Benedict had a lot of teaching about being celibate**

Benedict had a lot of teaching about being celibate, he said to love chastity. In other words, not to resist it, but to embrace it as a way. If we had time, there is much teaching about celibacy and chastity in the teachings of Benedict, and John Cassian, but I'm only going to raise one for our consideration today, and it is for the Friends of Benedict who live below the river, if you keep a celibate married life or a celibate single life, your energies will return back through your body system, and you'll see clearly with your eyes. And your skin will be clear, too.

Believe it or not, there is a physiological benefit to being celibate, I've been saying to my married celibate friends -- and I have many in direction -- I see the same thing in them as I do in myself. What you do is you channel all your sexual energy to your partner, and then the rest of the time you practice renunciation. Any time you think of another mate or another temptation, you have to resist that and return it only to your partner. I'm returning it to my way of life and I get this inner strength, this inner clarity. It's very powerful way of contemplation.

Under the river we're practicing stability. We're practicing obedience. We're practicing poverty, poverty meaning the right to use things: Not too much, not too little, not too high of things, not too low of things, not too sparse. Again, in my book, 'Thoughts Matter,' I go into those teachings..

Then there is celibacy. We practice living a celibate life with a chaste mind and a chaste heart. Celibacy is our choice, but our thoughts are governed by chastity.

I'm going to conclude here with another little song of Mary. I just love this one. You know

when you don't find things, sometimes something else is better.

Mary was the way for us. She was a normal woman who had a child and followed Christ through the cross and is still available to us, all we have to do is ask her for her presence. When I saw the flowers this morning, there she was.

So, I'll conclude this part, and then Kusala has a presentation on the five precepts, and then we'll talk about our disciplines and our way of life.

("Ave Maria" played by Sr. Meg.)

(Applause.)

Day 3

**Sister Meg** | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 3 - Thursday - May 1, 2003**  
**Rev. Kusala Bhikshu**

**Topics:**

The five precepts

Buddhist Meditation

Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration

Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness, and Not-Self

**REV. KUSALA:** I'm going to start with a reading, actually two readings. The first one is called the "Parable of the Lute."

*"Once the Blessed One lived near Rajagaha on Vulture Peak. At that time, while the venerable Sona lived alone and secluded in the Cool Forest, this thought occurred to him:*

*"Of those disciples of the Blessed One who are energetic, I am one. Yet, my mind has not found freedom." Now, the Blessed One, perceiving in his own mind the venerable Sona's thoughts, left Vulture Peak, and, as speedily as a strong man might stretch his bent arm or bend his stretched arm, he appeared in the Cool Forest before the venerable Sona. And he said to the venerable Sona: "Sona, did not this thought arise in your mind:*

*'Of those disciples of the Blessed One who are energetic, I am one. Yet, my mind has not found freedom.'"*

*" Yes, Lord. "*

*" Tell me, Sona, in earlier days were you not skilled in playing stringed music on a lute?"*

*" Yes, Lord. "*

*" And, tell me, Sona, when the strings of that lute were too taut, was then your lute tuneful and easily playable?"*

*" Certainly not, O Lord. "*

*" And when the strings of your lute were too loose, was then your lute tuneful and easily playable?"*

*" Certainly not, O Lord. "*

*" But when, Sona, the strings of your lute were neither too taut nor too loose, but adjusted to an even pitch, did your lute then have a wonderful sound and was it easily playable?"*

*"Certainly, O Lord. "*

*" Similarly, Sona, if energy is applied too strongly, it will lead to restlessness, and if energy*

*is too lax, it will lead to lassitude. Therefore, Sona, keep your energy in balance and balance the Spiritual Faculties and in this way focus your intention."*

*" Yes, O Lord," replied the venerable Sona in assent.*

*Afterward, the venerable Sona kept his energy balanced behind the Spiritual Faculties, and in this way focused his attention. And the venerable Sona, living alone and secluded, diligent, ardent and resolute, soon realized here and now, through his own direct knowledge, that unequaled goal of the holy life.*

This Second reading sheds light on the true goal of the holy life. And what is the true goal of the holy life? According to the Majjhima Nikaya, No. 29, the true goal of the holy life is:

*"Hence, the purpose of the holy life does not consist in acquiring alms, honor, or fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart: That, verily, is the object of the holy life. That is its essence. That is its goal."*

**JO:** Say that again.

**REV. KUSALA:** The unshakable deliverance of the heart: That is the object of the holy life. That is its essence. That is its goal. Deliverance of the heart.

**JO:** That's a new phrase for me, deliverance of the heart.

**REV. KUSALA:** Today I thought I would speak about the five precepts.

**The five precepts are the foundation of Buddhist practice.**

The five precepts are the foundation of our Buddhist practice. Some of the five precepts are found in the Noble Eightfold Path under the category of personal discipline. In that category we find, right speech, right action and right livelihood.

If the launching pad is askew, the rocket takes off and misses the mark. The foundation is very important to the rest of the structure. The five precepts are the foundation of Buddhist practice.

What is right speech? The Buddha said there are four kinds of unskillful speech. They are false, malicious, harsh, and gossip or iddle chatter. Those four kinds of speech always increase suffering.

When I was a volunteer at a state prison for men, I realized these men already understood the importance of right speech. If they said the wrong thing at the wrong time, they could be killed. Talk about a great incentive to speak skillfully.

If they made you feel uncomfortable, they would say, "Excuse me." If they needed something, they would say, "Please." If you gave it to them, they would say, "Thank you." Skillful speech reduces suffering, and you don't need to be a great yogi to do it.

There are three kinds of action that always increase suffering: Killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. The Buddha said killing causes much suffering, all creatures have a desire to live.

I was surprised that a cockroach might enjoy and cherish his life, but you try to kill one, and they'll run away. And those ants in your kitchen, they want to go on living as well.

It's a cruel joke, if you truly want to hold this precept, you are doomed to failure. Because everything we eat, was at one time alive. Killing is a part of living.

A vegetarian might say, "You know, I don't kill anything." I would say to him, "That's because you can't hear the screams of the broccoli."

We are all faced with the same dilemma, which is not should I kill, but what do I need to kill to stay alive. Vegetarians choose to kill the lowest life form they can, while meat eaters just aren't as picky. But let me say here, I am not aware of anyone achieving enlightenment because of what they ate. The Buddha ate meat, he ate what was offered.

Being a police chaplain puts me in an interesting place, especially with the first precept, not to kill. I have received e-mails from police officers asking, "It's sometimes necessary for me to use lethal force, from a Buddhist perspective what should I do?"

I reply in this way, "Never kill out of hatred and anger. Only service and duty. The consequence of your actions will be greatly reduced if your intention is one of service and duty to the community."

**There is a zen story I'd like to share with you about a samurai warrior.**

There is a zen story I'd like to share with you about a samurai warrior.

There was a great battle, and a shogun was killed. It became the Zen samurai warrior's duty to revenge the death of the shogun, and it took him an entire year to find the culprit.

One morning at 4:00 am, he went to this small house in an outlying village. He knocked on the door and it swung open. There, standing in the doorway was the man he had been looking for an entire year. He could now revenge the death of his shogun and go home. He pulled his sword to slay the man, but just as quickly put it back in the sheath and left.

The reason was, as he pulled his sword he was filled with a great anger and hatred. He would have to come back another day to fulfill his duty in the proper way. He had made it personal.

Beside the problem of taking life, it is really hard to be born. In the Buddhist tradition, we feel that life begins when a sperm, an egg, and karmic energy come together in the womb. The karmic energy necessary for life is called gandhabba, in the early Buddhist language of Pali. In Buddhism karmic energy is what transmigrates from lifetime to lifetime, not the soul.

Think of being reborn as a human and the chances of that occurring, like this.

There is a giant ocean, and at the bottom of that giant ocean is a one-eyed turtle. Every hundred years this one-eyed turtle comes to the surface for a breath of air.

Floating in the great ocean is a wooden yoke, having fallen from the neck of an ox. The chances of that one-eyed turtle surfacing through the center of that wooden yoke, are the same chances we face being reborn as a human being.

Now, there are times when I might have to kill.

When I have to kill something like a bug, I try to be as conscious as I can. I don't just react. I think about the consequences of my actions, and my accountability.

If there is any way not to kill -- Well for instance, if there is a spider in the corner of the zendo. I could go and fetch a jar and chase the spider down, and then take him outside. It may take five or ten minutes, but in those five or ten minutes I can reflect on the value of life, his life and mine.

Now, I know it's only a matter of time until that spider comes back, and I'll have to do it again. But that's okay, it's good practice and in the end, my practice benefits the spider and me.

When people ask me, "How I feel about war?"

I share with them my sadness over the loss of life. Governments come and go. Nations are here today, and gone tomorrow. The lines drawn on this earth by politicians, have been redrawn many times. Ending the lives of humans, animals, and insects because of certain views or agendas is really stupid. It's very unskillful karma and it causes a lot of suffering.

**\_\_\_So, Killing is always a big deal, no matter what's being killed.\_\_\_**

So, Killing is always a big deal, no matter what's being killed, an ant or a human. Though human life turns out to have a bit more value, because a human can achieve nirvana, an ant can't, until it's been reborn as a man or woman.

Okay, on to something else. Stealing, what's wrong with stealing? We all own or at least think we do, and are attached to stuff.

In Sr. Meg's case, she uses stuff, but doesn't own it, because of her vow of poverty. Most folks think they own the stuff they use, and that's where the problem comes in. And some people have so much stuff, they rent storage lockers to store the excess.

**MGC:** It's a big business.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes it is. Now, if somebody comes and takes the stuff you think you own, you're going to be really bummed out. A lot of the young people in juvenile hall are there because they didn't understand this concept, they took the stuff people thought they owned.

In order for us to live in community we need to respect each other's stuff, even if ownership is just an illusion. Okay, enough said on owning and stealing.

Now, we come to sexual misconduct. In Los Angeles where I come from, it's okay to do or be anything you want. When I was a young man growing up in Phoenix, Arizona. I could

only do half the stuff they do today, and I felt guilty about that.

Today you can be, bisexual, homosexual, tri-sexual, trans-sexual, non-sexual, a-sexual, always sexual, etc. It's so confusing! The idea of finding the right combination, or your true sexual identity, is very seductive.

Buddhism says, ultimate satisfaction is never going to happen. The activity of sex will never ultimately satisfy your desire for sex.

Now, is that a bummer or what? I mean you can have sex a thousand times and want it a thousand one. When you seek satisfaction through sexual activity, your desire only gets stronger.

I'm thinking it's a lot like hunger, and to be honest with you I'm getting tired of being hungry.

I've been hungry every day of my life. I'm hungry in the morning, and I have breakfast. I'm hungry in the afternoon, and I have lunch. I'm hungry in the evening, I have dinner. Sometimes I'm hungry after dinner, and I'll have a snack.

I'm thinking if I could end my hunger forever, I'd have a lot of extra time and money. So tomorrow morning I'm going to get up real early, and I'm going to eat as much as I want, as often as I want. I'm going to be so full that I'll never want to eat again.

If I could somehow do that, it would only take a day or two to be hungry again. That is essentially how sexual desire works. It's the same deal.

What did the Buddha say specifically to lay people about sex? He said four things.

He said, do not have sex with people who are married. Do not have sex with people who are engaged. Do not have sex with people who are being supported by their parents -- children. And do not have sex with people against their will.

That's all he said. He didn't say anything else. I'm assuming he felt every community, every city, every state, every nation would initiate their own laws, their own way of moderating sexual activity.

He did say a lot to monks and nuns about not having sex... Let me say there is nothing wrong with sex. Sex is wonderful... It's the desire for sex that keeps getting in the way of our ultimate satisfaction.

Celibacy offers a monk or nun greater flexibility in how they live their life.

I don't look at not having sex as a penalty. I look at it as an opportunity. When I stopped having sexual relationships, I started to see myself in a totally different way. Not having sex became part of my inner exploration, part of my practice.

**\_\_\_\_\_Desire in not ended by not having sex, desire only ends in Nirvana.\_\_\_\_\_**

Now, does not having sex end suffering? No, it just means you suffer in a different way. Desire in not ended by not having sex, desire only ends with Nirvana.



Okay, now we come to right livelihood. The Buddha said there are certain kinds of livelihood that increase suffering, and certain kinds of livelihood that decrease suffering. For instance, it's not skillful to be a butcher, or sell drugs and alcohol. It's not skillful to sell human beings... slavery, or to make poison. Certain livelihoods aren't conducive to Buddhist practice because they create more suffering, not less.

One time I was teaching a meditation class, and I was talking about right livelihood. A woman in the class was a bartender, and she never came back after my little talk. I see now, I should have been more skillful. So, if you find yourself involved in a livelihood that seems to increase suffering, just don't quit your job. It's really hard to find work, and there may be people dependent on your pay check. Retrain yourself, and then seek other employment.

I was giving a talk at USC to a group of business majors. One of the guys came from a Buddhist family and asked if it was okay for a Buddhist to make a lot of money. I said, "Oh, yes, think how much more money you can give away."

There is one precept I haven't talked about yet, and I'm a bit hesitant because it's the hardest one for some folks. So, let me go over the five precepts, and then I'll talk about the fifth precept.

The first precept is, and it's said this way -- the wording is very important -- "I accept the training precept not to kill."

The second precept... I accept the training precept not to steal, not to take what is not given.

A story comes to mind about the second precept that was played out in real life for me at a Buddhist conference.

There was this monk, he was eating lunch and he had this beautiful red apple sitting on the table in front of him. One of the other monks -- not from his tradition -- was taken aback by how beautiful it was, and picked it up and said, "What beautiful apple, I bet you're going to enjoy eating this one," and he set it back on the table.

Now, the first monk who was going to eat the apple, couldn't touch it until it was reoffered to him. Because, as soon as that second monk touched the apple, ownership transferred to him. So, please, don't touch a monk's food.

Okay the five are... I accept the training precept not to kill. I accept the training precept not to steal. I accept the training precept not to indulge in sexual misconduct. I accept the training precept not to lie. I accept the training precept not to consume intoxicants.

The fifth precept... Not to consume intoxicants. Every day here in New Harmony, I see the chalice and I see wine in the chalice. I know it's symbolic of something else. But, it makes me think of my precepts.

A lot of people want to become Buddhists, but enjoy a beer or two once in awhile.

So, at the IBMC where I live, we changed the fifth precept for lay people to read... Not to consume intoxicants to the point of intoxication. That becomes their starting place.

Now let me say here, there anything wrong with wine or beer?

In fact, they have some medicinal qualities. The problem with consuming any alcoholic beverage is... Sooner or later it will steal your wisdom. If enough of your wisdom is stolen, you might break the other four precepts and not even know it.

How hard won is wisdom?

Buddhists sit quietly for hours at a time, go on long retreats, read Buddhist texts, listen to their teachers, and try to be mindful of everything they do. All it takes is a few beers, and it's all out the window. When you start to see how much time you've invested in your wisdom, not drinking makes perfect sense.

Eventually it becomes clear: Why, not killing, not stealing, not indulging in sexual misconduct, not lying, not consuming intoxicants is the path to freedom, and that leads to end of suffering.

**Following the five precepts is a way to live in the world  
\_\_\_ and not cause more suffering. \_\_\_**

Following the five precepts is a way to live in the world and not cause more suffering.

**SR. MEG:** Kusala, the precepts are very important, and they lead us to that liberated heart. But I'm curious, how do you sustain the precepts? I know you're going to say meditation, so please tell us about Buddhist meditation.

**REV. KUSALA:** Meditation is the second category of the Eight-Fold Path. The three category's are; Personal Discipline, Mental Perfection, and Wisdom.

Okay Mental purification... There are three path factors in the second category of meditation: Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Right effort in meditation doesn't have anything to do with the body. It's not about going to 24-hour fitness or Gold's gym. Right effort is to sit quietly and observe your thoughts as skillful or unskillful.

Skillful thoughts are thoughts of self limitation, generosity, compassion, and wisdom.

Unskillful thoughts are thoughts of lust, greed, hatred, and delusion.

There are four things you can do with these thoughts. You can abandon them, prevent them, develop them, or maintain them. You prevent or abandon the unskillful thoughts, and develop or maintain the skillful ones.

To share a personal example of how all this might work... I'm sitting in meditation, and in my mind... I find myself in a supermarket, but not standing in line this time.

I'm on the bakery aisle, and there in front of me is a stack of Entenmann's chocolate cakes. I say to myself, "I'd like to take two of those cakes with me, one for tonight and one

for tomorrow." I see greed has arisen, because if it were generosity, I would take one for me and one for you.

I simply note whether the thought is skillful or unskillful, without any kind of story attached to my discernment. I then let the thought go. That in a nutshell, is right effort in Buddhist meditation.

**The Buddha practiced two forms of meditation.  
\_\_\_ One was taught to him. One he rediscovered.\_\_\_**

The Buddha practiced two forms of meditation. One was taught to him. One he rediscovered.

The reason I use the word rediscovered is because, according to the early Buddhist tradition of Theravada, there were many Buddhas before Siddhartha Gautama. He was one in a line of Buddhas, and we already know who the next Buddha will be. His name is Maitreya Buddha.

The Buddha was taught Samatha (tranquility) meditation, and rediscovered Vipassana (insight) meditation. These are the two forms of Buddhist meditation, Samatha and vipassana -- tranquility and insight.

Tranquility meditation was taught to the Buddha by the yogis of India. Tranquility meditation is what I consider to be the meditation of enlightenment. Insight meditation is the meditation of Nirvana.

I make a distinction between enlightenment and nirvana. This is a distinction that came to me after a lot of personal reflection and meditation. It helps me understand Buddhist meditation with more clarity. It's not something I found in a book, it came out of my practice.

I define enlightenment as the wisdom of emptiness, and Nirvana as the end of suffering.

I think, the Mahayana tradition focuses more on enlightenment and the wisdom of emptiness, in fact postponing their own Nirvana until all other sentient beings have achieved it.

The early school of Buddhism known as the Theravada seems to focus more on Nirvana, and uses insight meditation as its primary technology.

What is this Samatha meditation, and what are the characteristics?

There is something in tranquility (Samatha) meditation called the four jhanas, the four stages of tranquility.

The first jhana has five characteristics: Applied thought, sustained thought, happiness, bliss, and equanimity.

The second jhana has three characteristics: Bliss, happiness, and equanimity.

The third jhana has two characteristics: Happiness and equanimity.

The fourth jhana has one characteristic: Equanimity.

If you are doing Buddhist meditation and gaining anything, you're doing it wrong. The Buddhist path, is a path of renunciation. We are not doing it to gain generosity. We are doing it to get rid of greed. We are not doing it to gain compassion. We are doing it to get rid of anger and hatred. We are not doing it to gain wisdom. We are doing it to get rid of delusion and ignorance.

We already have as much generosity, compassion, and wisdom as we will ever need. The things that prevents us from attaining and realizing our innate perfection is greed, hatred, and delusion, the three poisons. Meditation is designed to get rid of the three poisons and wake us up to our perfection.

What a positive message this is. We are already okay; we just haven't realized yet.

Okay, the first jhana has applied thought, sustained thought, happiness, bliss, and equanimity. The mediator would sit on the floor quietly --

**SR. MEG:** Hold on a minute. What would be a word for jhana that I could translate?

**REV. KUSALA:** You could translate it as dhyana, which is Sanskrit. You could translate it as trance, which some of the earlier translators did, but I think that misinterprets it. You could translate it as a deep state of tranquility, as in the four stages of tranquility.

**SR. MEG:** J-A-N-A?

**REV. KUSALA:** J-H-A-N-A.

Back to the four stages of tranquility. The mediator is sitting quietly, legs crossed.

He or she brings their attention to the tip of the nose and holds it there, applied thought, sustained thought. Applying attention and holding it at the tip of the nose. Just feeling breath go in and out. As the focus deepens, bliss and rapture rise in the body, happiness in the mind, and the first trace of equanimity.

This happens in any concentrated state. You can get the same thing in a theater, watching an exciting movie. I must admit, though, meditation on breath is not as exciting as a good movie. It takes a lot more intention to stay with the breath.

With more effort and understanding, the mediator go's from the first jhana into the second jhana, having left applied thought and sustained thought behind. The mind simply rests on the object of meditation. There is a greater sense of bliss and rapture, a greater sense of happiness and equanimity.

But there is a problem with this bliss and rapture of the body. Bliss and rapture distort the way we perceive the world. The meditator might say, "Gosh, if I could get rid of this rapture and bliss, I could perceive the world in a much more realistic way."

Imagine a pond in a forest, and it's a moonlit night, you throw a rock in the pond and create waves. The waves distort the reflection of the moon. In the same way bliss and rapture distort the way we perceive the world.

With a deeper understanding and even more effort, the mediator slips into the third jhana, with its two characteristics: Happiness and equanimity. There is no longer bliss and rapture in the body.

After coming out of the third jhana, the mediator reflects on happiness, the subtle happiness of mind. It now becomes apparent, that even happiness can distort the world.

The mediator thinks, if I could rid myself of happiness, I could see the world exactly the way it is; not through the colored glasses of judgment and preference, attachment and repulsion. So, with greater understanding and a renewed effort, the mediator goes into the third jhana and then slips into the fourth jhana. Now the only characteristic left is equanimity: Perfect balance in mind.

There is no joy. There is no sorrow, no bliss or rapture, and no pain. The mediator is centered, focused, and clear. Mediators will not suffer or feel pain as long as they are in the fourth jhana. They have reached a profound level of acceptance with the way things are.

But, once the meditator gets off the cushion, leaves the zendo, gets into his or her car and goes on the freeway... Anger, hatred, and delusion will rise again. It's the same old story. If only there was a way to permanently get rid of greed, hatred and delusion? To realize perfect balance of mind, and have equanimity all the time.

That was the dilemma the Buddha faced Twenty-five hundred years ago. The answer for him was to rediscover insight meditation, which solved the puzzle and ended his suffering forever.

There are four kinds of insight meditation: Mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, and mindfulness of mental objects.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the mindfulness of sensations or feelings.

The mediator is sitting on the floor again, cross- legged. But rather than going into deeper and deeper states of tranquility, he goes to a place called access concentration, which is a kind of momentary concentration. The mediator scanning his body from the tip of his toes to the top of his head, begins looking for sensations.

The Buddha said there are three kinds of sensations. Pleasant sensations, unpleasant sensations, and neutral sensations, they occur in both body and mind.

The mediator might start at the toes and work his way up, with the goal of being aware of any sensation. When one is found, he might think to himself pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Then he would note what kind of sensation it was and let it go -- pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Let go, and find the next one.

He might do this for 20 minutes, up and down, looking for sensations, noting, naming, and letting go -- pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

After all this awareness of sensations, he would then go into deep state of reflection on the three aspects of Buddhist wisdom.

Which are: Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

The first thing he might think is, "Are all sensations impermanent? Did any of them last the length of my meditation? Did any of them change in intensity, or were they always the same?"

Upon reflection, he would find all sensations whether in mind or body were impermanent. They would arise because of conditions, exist, and in some cases pass away, only to trouble him again later. Arising and passing away, with no permanence to be found.

He might think to himself, is everything in the world impermanent? Does anything exist forever? Is everything created out of conditions? When conditions change do all things grow or decay.

**\_\_\_Impermanence is the first aspect of Buddhist wisdom.\_\_\_**

Impermanence is the first aspect of Buddhist wisdom.

The second aspect of Buddhist wisdom is unsatisfactoriness. Are all sensations unsatisfactory?

Now you might think, well, they weren't all unsatisfactory because some of them turned out to be pretty nice. I had these little blissful feelings, little energy flows. But then, when they ended, I was disappointed. Because of impermanence, every pleasant sensations became imperfect or unsatisfactory. The world is ultimately unsatisfactory, because all things change.

Now we come to the third aspect, 'Not Self.' Does any sensation have an essence or quality that exists independently? Does any sensation have an original unconditional substance?

Sensations seem to be conditional rather than unconditional. Sensations seem to be process, rather than an event.

There was a wonderful book published in the late '70s called "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance." One of the dilemmas in the book, was to find quality. Where does the quality live in a object?

The main character in the book rode a Honda Super Hawk 400, and his buddy a BMW. His buddy always felt his BMW had more quality than the Honda.

I'm thinking, what would happen if both these guys went to a giant parking lot, and took their bikes apart into their 10,000 pieces.

Over here we have the Honda, over there we have the BMW. Now I'm thinking, we give each bike owner a magnifying glass, and we tell them, "Please, find the quality on your motorcycle. In what part does it reside?"

They would go to each part and look carefully for the essence of quality. Their conclusion might be, when all the pieces are put together to form an illusion of oneness, quality appears. When you take the one and make it many, the illusion of quality is lost in the parts.

If I were to look in my mind and body, where would I find my original essence? My soul.

The meditator seeing impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not self to be true, one day will be liberated from suffering... Because there is no 'One' to suffer, and no 'One' to cause suffering. The wisdom of Buddhism cuts through lust, greed, hatred, and delusion like a great sword, leaving behind, self limitation, generosity, compassion, and wisdom. The end of suffering, nirvana.

After the Buddha achieved nirvana through insight meditation, he never practiced it again. He had reached the end of the holy life, the perfection of the heart. There was no need for more insight. But, he continued to practice tranquility meditation until the end of his life.

Insight meditation ended his suffering. Tranquility meditation ended his pain. When he was sick or feeling discomfort from a bad back or just being old -- he died at the age of 80, you know-- he would simply go into deep states of jhana and neutralize the pain. When he did die, he died in the fourth jhana.

The two forms of Buddhist meditation are tranquility and insight. Some schools of Buddhism emphasize one, some the other, the Buddha did both.

**\_\_\_Suffering is optional. Pain isn't.\_\_\_**

**REV. KUSALA:** Suffering is optional. Pain isn't. Suffering happens when you don't want to have the pain.

**JO:** Pain is physical?

**REV. KUSALA:** Pain is both physical and emotional. Body and mind. But, suffering only happens in the mind. The body can't suffer.

**SR. MEG:** I've sat through many Buddhist teachings, this is the clearest I have ever heard on meditation practice.

**Rev. Kusala:** Thank you.

**Day 3**

**Sister Meg | **Rev. Kusala** | Q & A**





**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 3 - Thursday - May 1, 2003**  
**Questions and Answers**

**Topics:**

[Extrasensory Perception](#)  
[Balance and the Middle Way](#)  
[Not-Self and Ego](#)  
[Jesus Christ/Human](#)  
[Christianity and Suffering](#)  
[Rebirth or Reincarnation](#)  
[Inter-religious Dialogue](#)

**JO:** In New Harmony the Woodland Indians lived here I think until 800 A.D., the Germans came in 1814 and created a complete German village in ten years. Then they sold it to Robert Owen and built their third village in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. Before that they had Old Harmonie in Butler County outside of Pittsburgh, but they were all celibates, and they had energy. Very Buddhist in a way.

**REV. KUSALA:** And Christian in a way, too.

**BC:** When you started out, you talked about three path factors for mental purification. The first one was right effort.

**REV. KUSALA:** The second one is right mindfulness and the third is right concentration. The mindfulness is vipassana or insight, and concentration is tranquility or samatha.

**BC:** Right mindfulness and then the third?

**REV. KUSALA:** Right concentration.

**BC:** Got it.

**JS:** The divine eye and the divine what?

[The divine eye and the divine what?](#)

**REV. KUSALA:** After the first monk abused his extrasensory perception to make money, through fortune telling and things of that sort, the Buddha made a rule that monks and nuns were not allowed to talk at all about their spiritual attainments. For a monk or nun, the rule of not lying applies to lying about their spiritual attainment.

So, if somebody says, "Can you read minds," a monk and nun will stay silent or say, "No."

**JS:** Interesting!

**REV. KUSALA:** That kind of thing is supposed to be used for the benefit of all human beings to help end suffering and not to prop yourself up as a mystic or soothsayer.

**KP:** Magic man.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes. So, can you see the two distinct paths in Buddhist meditation? One really helps the other.

Sometimes people who only do insight meditation, seem a bit dry to me. They are just sort of analytical about everything. If they would only do a little bit of samatha, tranquility meditation I think to myself, maybe get a couple of ounces of bliss and rapture to mix in with that dryness.

Sometimes people who only do samatha or tranquility meditation are sort of mushy and smoozey to me, a bit of insight might temper that. The final goal of Buddhism is Nirvana a balanced blend of wisdom and compassion. There is a technique for great compassion, and a technique for great wisdom.

\_\_\_**The Benedictines would call that balance.**\_\_\_

**MGC:** The Benedictines would call that balance.

**REV. KUSALA:** Balance, yes. The middle way.

**SR. MEG:** The insight people would be Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Barre, Massachusetts. That's the insight. Jack Kornfield, he would be out of that school. And the other, who would you represent here?

**REV. KUSALA:** Well, I would say most of the Zen schools. Maybe some of the Hindu traditions as well.

**SR. MEG:** Rinzai and Soto?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes

**SR. MEG:** So, Norman Fischer.

I'll translate this into John Main and Thomas Keating after a while.

**REV. KUSALA:** For the record, and I would like to be clear about this, no one I've listened too and no book I have read, has really explained the subtle distinctions the way I do

between Mahayana, Theravada, samatha, vipassana, enlightenment, and nirvana.

When I speak about the different distinctions it allows me to think more completely about the Buddhist path and Buddhist meditation. A personal approach if you will, and not a scholarly one.

**SR. MEG:** Well, let me ask, what if you had a Hindu practitioner here? Where would you put them in this catechesis?

**REV. KUSALA:** A Hindu practitioner, I would put him in the samatha group. The Buddha learned tranquility meditation from yogis. Insight meditation was something he rediscovered later through his own effort.

**SR. MEG:** I notice you use the words, "Not-Self," rather than "No-Self." Do you want to talk about that?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, a lot of the early translators of Buddhist texts used the No-Self explanation, and it seems to me in 2003 No-Self is a misnomer; that we need a self on the path. Even when we're enlightened, a kind of self is needed to live in the world.

The Not-Self idea applies to what I think is a more realistic explanation of what occurs; a new kind of self is possible. But until you start to meditate, you are the ego/self, and it is very much the master. I first ran across the term Not-Self in an article by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

As practice deepens Self becomes more of a tool than a master. That's why I now use the phrase Not-Self, rather than No-Self.

**MGC:** I don't quite see why you call it Not-Self.

**REV. KUSALA:** Okay. No-Self would be a denial of ego. Not-Self is saying that I am not the ego; my ultimate reality is one of interconnectedness and interdependence. Not separate, not self, but interconnected.

**\_\_\_I call it my lesser self and my greater self.\_\_\_**

**MGC:** I call it my lesser self and my greater self. Is that okay?

**REV. KUSALA:** That's fine. I like that.

**SR. MEG:** That's a very key point. Are you all on board on this self thought, because in Christianity there is a lot being said now about moving to the not self. If you notice the portrait on the page of Cassian was, "No thoughts of self," so it's not chatter back to the self.

**SR. MEG:** But you were talking to Milo back there, and you were talking to yourself. There

is a self. You hold the self, correct?

**REV. KUSALA:** I have a self, and it is giving this presentation. Self exists. I like to think the birth or creation stories we find in myth and culture are more about the beginning of the ego, than the beginning of the world. Self is a big deal, without self/ego our plight as human beings would be much worse. But, Self is a poor master, it is subject to greed, hatred, and delusion. The books of Ken Wilber were very helpful in understanding Not-Self vs No-Self.

**JO:** Self can be a tool.

**KP:** Like a choice.

**REV. KUSALA:** Being a Not-Self gives us a new choice, that's right. That's exactly right.

**SR. MEG:** The Dalai Lama in a room like this, said, "The difference between the Buddhist and the Christian is we do it through effort, you do it through God."

Our effort is God's grace, responding to the impulse of the Holy Spirit. For the Dalai Lama, I understood him to say that the Buddhist way is self effort, our own effort.

Again, thank you very much. I hope I'm as clear on the Christian take of the same story, but it is different. And I'll tell you the problem with this, if you have Christians take that, as you would have a problem if you took the one I'm going to run up the flagpole.

As Christians, we believe before anything existed, there was God. God existed in Christ, Jesus existed, you know. God wasn't just undifferentiated God, but there was Christ Jesus. And then through Christ Jesus, you and I existed before time through Christ, meaning that's in John's gospel.

So, there is this whole idea that all of us somehow through God through Christ, we came into time. And Jesus, then being human like us in all things but sin, through the Trinity we are brought into this God experience, the God event, the God essence. Not the essence but the existence. God's essence is God. We are not God. That's how we get the idea of creator God. We participate. We are deified, but we are always somehow differentiated. We don't totally become annihilated like fauna in the Muslim tradition, or like the merging in the Hindu tradition or the total Nirvana in the Buddhist tradition.

Through the doctrine of the Trinity we completely keep our distinctions of Father, Son, Holy Spirit, what those words protect, the threeness in the oneness, and then Jesus who was human and God, and we who are human but God through Jesus.

So, those distinctions have to stay total, and because they are just the way it's been revealed to us. And these distinctions carry itself all the way through. So, you can't leave those distinctions and say, well, that's great. That's just a doctrine. They hold true all the way through here.

Now, in dialogue with Ken Wilber, who happens to be a very close friend of Thomas Keating -- and Thomas and I worked together ten years, so I feel like I had a big dose of Ken Wilber -- Ken Wilber ascribes to, and it makes a lot of sense, that in total perennial philosophy that all things are taken up into higher. The matter, what happens to matter?

**REV. KUSALA:** Does it matter!

(Laughter.)

**SR. MEG:** As Christians, we would say matter is Jesus. Jesus became matter with us, so all human matter is as matter deified. So matter is in its, not in its essence but in its existence is holy. It's sort of like we become holy diving into our human being through Christ Jesus. And we're graced humans, really.

So, the incarnation is not to transcend through higher states of consciousness into Nirvana, but somehow embodying it.

\_\_\_Do we have carnal body?\_\_\_

Now, do we die? Yes. Do we have carnal body? Yes.

I don't know how this works, but something about matter is much more defined than it is in your tradition.

**MGC:** Kind of like Chardi, isn't it?

**SR. MEG:** Yes.

**JO:** George MacLeod, matter matters.

**SR. MEG:** But we are pointing out, then, why to critically meditate in that tradition and go up the stiles of that philosophy is pretty serious, depending on which school you are meditating in.

Whereas, if you stay in the Christian tradition, this whole human -- and that's why, for instance, Adrian Montcalm, he would have in the center of his formation field in anthropology, Christ is our center. Christ and all is taken up in Christ.

So, to your distinction between Nirvana and enlightenment, we would say we just enter into as humans through Christ. And then whatever is the experience is the experience, but it's Christ that is our desire. And, so, we don't desire anything beyond Christ, really, because as Christ is taken up through the Holy Spirit and the Father, that's kind of like their job; not our job. We just totally surrender.

And so our effort is just to be in the presence, and so our meditation practice is more like that.

**REV. KUSALA:** Is it to be in the presence?

**SR. MEG:** Yes.

**REV. KUSALA:** Our job is to be in the present!

**SR. MEG:** You are to be in the present. Now, how we get to the presence is to be in the present moment, because all we have is right now.

**REV. KUSALA:** I'm just curious now, do you have a self, and does it go anywhere when you have spiritual attainment?

**SR. MEG:** Okay. This is the big difference between Thomas Keating and myself. I think we have self, big time. Thomas would say there is a no self, but I think it goes too much in your direction.

I think the self, even back to the apophatic or kataphatic tradition, the self is, because of Christ Jesus being human, we have that whole experience of being human. And we cannot negate the human experience which has, and I think it's that healthy thing you were talking about, it has the sense of ego. But what we do is we surrender it, and then couple it with our love, which is Christ.

So our chatter then, instead of back to our self, self-centeredness, we make Christ our center, the mystery our center. So that any self that we have, if you are apophatic, you just throw that self, but it's still duality.

And there is another problem when people think they are in a nondual unitive consciousness too soon, I say, "Well, who's got that experience?" They say, "I do." And I say, "Well, who's telling me about it?" It can't be nondual. You may access the experience of -- how would you say that?

**REV. KUSALA:** A nondual experience?

**SR. MEG:** Yes.

**REV. KUSALA:** In my understanding of Buddhism, I would call that an enlightenment experience.

**SR. MEG:** You would access enlightenment, but then where do you live?

**REV. KUSALA:** You live in samsara, the world of constant change, birth, death, and suffering, samsara.

**SR. MEG:** What suffers in samsara?

**REV. KUSALA:** The self sufferers, it wants things to be different than they are. This body of ours can't suffer, it can only feel pain. Our body is always stuck in the present moment experience of samsara, subject to sickness, disease and death, but our mind isn't. It has the potential of transformation. Enlightenment.

**SR. MEG:** Are we losing anybody here?

\_\_\_Christ suffered, and Christianity as a whole essentially grew out of that.\_\_\_

**CEE:** What keeps going through my mind is Buddhism seems to try to solve the problem of suffering and pain. Christ suffered, and Christianity as a whole essentially grew out of that.

Some people are going to St. Francis Chapel, and there are symbols of creation there, but his great attainment was to get the stigmata and to find so deeply the reality and meaning and substance of life in the suffering of Christ that he was able to take it onto himself and share in it.

And Pope John XXIII, when he was dying, refused chemicals that would alleviate his pain, and he offered his suffering as a prayer for the healing and the bringing together of the church. So, I think suffering is not to be welcomed, but in the center of suffering you can find God. And the word, you said one of the basic things is compassion. Well, that means calmness, too. With compassion is suffering, suffering with another person. It's a positive attitude toward suffering.

**SR. MEG:** Again, we had this conference at Gethsemani on suffering just recently, and the book is over there about it, and we came to three stages of suffering, and then you are already beyond that. But the first is when you see it, we must alleviate it. First of all, we must prevent it wherever we can.

Then, if we can't prevent it, the second stage is alleviate it, stop the suffering any way we can. Third, if we can't prevent it and stop it, we must transform it. And this is the transformation of suffering through the Bodhisattva idea, or we say through Christ Jesus lifting up all suffering, and even in the mystical sense taking on, transmuting suffering, taking on another person's suffering for the sake of the world.

So, we were really, by the end of that we were really quite compatible. The difference is the way in which you envision the human body and because we have a human God mediator.

Yours is unmediated.

**SR. MEG:** Their self effort mediates their enlightenment. And we have Christ Jesus who mediates our enlightenment, and that's a big difference.

**REV. KUSALA:** So, if we could take suffering out of Christianity, would you still call it Christianity?

**SR. MEG:** What do you think, Dr. E?

**CEE:** No.

**SR. MEG:** I don't think so. This is such a stumbling block to the Buddhists. (Indicating the crucifix.)

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, it's tough. There is a lot of suffering there, a lot of suffering.

**RJH:** When you talk about mind and body, and body is the lotus of suffering -- the mind can be free -- do you see that as an eternal thing? Is it destructible or indestructible, the mind?

**REV. KUSALA:** The mind is the thing that seems to go from rebirth to rebirth. That's what transmigrates in some later forms of Buddhism. In the early schools of Buddhism, it's karmic energy. Karmic energy is created by mind, mouth, and body. Or you could say intention, speech, and action.

You can get rid of the suffering by transforming your consciousness in nirvana. You can get rid of pain temporarily by one pointedness, going into deep states of tranquility.

Buddhism teaches us we have a choice in the cycle of birth and death. If we achieve Nirvana, the goal of Buddhism, we are not reborn again.

**RJH:** But in whatever form, that mind will be here in 32,000 years when the next Buddha comes?

**REV. KUSALA:** I would say our karmic energy will be here if the goal of nirvana is not achieved.

**RJH:** I think that is a difference for us, because while we muddle this up a little bit because we talk about eternal life, and we talk about ourselves having eternal life, but in and of ourselves we have no eternal life. We -- body, mind and soul -- are completely destructible.

**REV. KUSALA:** The soul is as well?

**\_\_\_It only exists in eternity as it is related in love to God\_\_\_**

**RJH:** All of it, yes, it's destructible. And it only exists in eternity as it is related in love to God; so, there has to be a self here to relate in love to God there.

**SR. MEG:** Do you mean soul or spirit, Bunker? Are you using soul as the enlightened soul, your individuality?

**RJH:** I sort of think of our soul -- the problem is we have the language messed up with



Neoplatonism.

**SR. MEG:** Yes, I know.

**RJH:** What I think of a soul as, it is a body/mind unity, a spirit/body unity.

**SR. MEG:** Do you have your individuality? Is that destructible?

**RJH:** Yes, it is destructible. But when it's in relationship to God, it is continued, but only because of the relationship.

**SR. MEG:** Can you ever get out of the relationship?

**RJH:** I think you can.

**SR. MEG:** That is not mainstream, is it?

**RJH:** Well, the problem is we're not sure where the mainstream -- the stream got pretty muddy along the way. It's kind of like the Mississippi; there are some things that floated in there.

I do think that one of the distinctions between, or the things that we've dealt with is the heresy of agnosticism. Agnostics are talking about us being divine, having divine spirits trapped in a body. And the way out of that is out of it. But I think Christianity sees the body as good. More than that, the whole creation as very good. Not a bad thing.

**SR. MEG:** So, why would we be annihilated, our individuality?

**RJH:** Because if we lose that relationship with God, which is the only thing that is eternal.

**SR. MEG:** Okay. You don't believe in universal salvation.

**RJH:** You can have universal salvation or not, but it depends on the relationship with God. And if there is universal salvation it's because God's love is so powerful that God could even love Adolph Hitler.

**CEE:** The word, sin, describes a break between the person and God.

**RJH:** The word, sin, describes the barriers between God and ourself and between you and me, yes, because there is another triangle. I mean, it's love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind. That's insufficient because it's love your neighbor as well.

**SR. MEG:** Well, we are getting off into this free choice, and is it just a one-time consent that God's mercy -- but that's a big point if you think you are going to be annihilated at the end. I don't know, and I'd say that I wouldn't come down on that side. I think that

existence is our prerogative from all eternity, and if there is any meaning for hell, your existence is alienated with God, but you are never annihilated.

**RJH:** What I hear him saying is an agnostic model, and I think that's different from our model because our Nirvana, as it were, is a relationship.

**SR. MEG:** To our body.

**RJH:** Yes. It's not -- no, our relationship to God.

**SR. MEG:** Right.

**RJH:** It's not a disappearance into.

**REV. KUSALA:** Okay. So it's always duality.

**RJH:** Yes.

**SR. MEG:** That's why Trinity matters. Trinity because of these distinctions helps. They are there for our understanding of the way it is, it seems to us. Now, have we lost everybody here on this one?

**MGC:** Could we just pick up on one of the points? People were asking about sin. I've always had trouble with the word, sin. I always think separation is a nicer word than sin. And I also kind of like Matthew Fox's approach of original blessing rather than original sin for the Christian.

Do you want to speak to that at all, original blessing, see how it ties in?

**SR. MEG:** The idea of sin and karma. Karma is tied to reincarnation.

**REV. KUSALA:** Rebirth in Buddhism.

### \_\_\_There is a difference between rebirth and reincarnation\_\_\_

There is a difference between rebirth and reincarnation the transmigrating of a soul. In Buddhism rebirth does not require a soul. Reincarnation does. So, in the concept of reincarnation, it is unchanging original essence.

The idea of an unchanging quality going from lifetime to lifetime until it finally merges with a great soul is more Hindu than Buddhist. The Buddha felt that it worked a little differently, he only saw process, not event. The karmic energy created in this lifetime transmigrates to the next lifetime.

I think of it in this way: There is this unborn, undying energy that can't be created, can't

be destroyed, but it can be transformed. And so we're all like human transformers. We have this energy, and we think, say, and do. That has the effect of transforming the energy. The Buddha gave this transformation a moral value by using skillful/unskillful, connected to more suffering/less suffering.

So, we're taking energy, sometimes we're taking unskillful energy, and turning it into skillful. And sometime the other way around. We are taking this energy, we are transforming it every time we think, say, or do something. That transformed energy, continues year after year, lifetime after lifetime.

A story about all this: I go to the airport. I have my satchel filled with all the merit or demerit that I've acquired in this lifetime. I put it on the conveyor belt. It goes behind the wall. I show the person at the desk my ticket, and he says it's invalid. I can't get on the plane, but my satchel already is.

The plane takes off and lands, and now somebody comes and gets my satchel. And they take it home, and they open it up, and they say, wow, look at these great shoes. I'm going to have a good life. Or, they open it up and say, hey, there is nothing in here. This life is going to acquire a lot of effort.

So, it's that energy, that merit or demerit that seems to go into the next lifetime until you achieve Nirvana. And then the plane doesn't take off again because a person who achieves Nirvana does not create any more karma. Karma ceases to be created, and you can't be reborn without karma.

**MP:** I was going to ask you what Buddhism teaches about children and suffering and especially, you know, children that are being hurt through no -- they haven't done anything.

**SR. MEG:** They are innocent.

**REV. KUSALA:** I have to be really careful when I hear those stories, because it would be easy for me to say, well, that's just their karma, cause and consequence. That doesn't have a whole lot of compassion or wisdom behind it.

In early Buddhist tradition, there is something called the five niyamas. The five niyamas explain why stuff happens. They are; physical inorganic order, order of germs and seeds, karma, order of natural phenomena, order of mind or psychic law. As you can see Karma is only one of the niyamas, but it is the only one we have any control over.

So, a child may be born in the wrong country -- that would be environment -- may have genes that didn't allow them to reach their full potential, may have karmic residue from many past lives of unskillful activity, and they are born and they die.

Now, it was a quick life, but that's not the end according to Buddhism. Their next rebirth will occur pretty soon. And in that quick life on this earth a lot of the consequences of past actions, intention and speech were purified. But we cry when that happens. It's a sad

event. Does that make sense?

**MP:** Yes.

**SR. MEG:** Transmigration. You did rebirth, reincarnation. What about transmigration?

**REV. KUSALA:** The thing that transmigrates in Buddhism would be karmic energy. The soul would transmigrate in Hinduism.

**SR. MEG:** So, you don't have a soul that's going to transmigrate to your next lifetime?

**REV. KUSALA:** No.

**SR. MEG:** That was a reformation of Hinduism.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes. The Buddha felt there was a problem with the concept of soul.

Again, it's an ethical problem. I think this is understated in Buddhism; that the Buddha was a very ethical fellow, and his rules of conduct were there because of the problem of suffering. It's really hard to live together and not suffer.

If there is an unchanging quality that's reincarnated time and time again, and transmigrates from one lifetime to the next, he would call that eternalism. Because of eternalism, personal responsibility may be rejected in any one lifetime.

It might go something like this, so what if I kill a few thousand people in this lifetime; I have many more lifetimes to make up for it.

He also say a problem with nihilism. He said if you were nihilistic, and that if you felt this life was your only life and when you die you would simply feed the trees and grass, what did it matter what you did in this life. If you were a sinner or saint, the same end would be yours, fertilizer.

He saw a problem with nihilism. He saw a problem with eternalism. And that's where he came up with the middle path of the transmigration of karmic energy, which seems to allow for personal responsibility in each lifetime.

**\_\_\_It sounds like we are getting into dogma\_\_\_**

**SR. MEG:** It sounds like we are getting into dogma, but these are important distinctions for the way in which we view ourselves, and the way in which we pray, and the way in which we take -- this is what I call discernment. We are discerning our meditation practice, and you have to know what you are doing when you do it, and you have to have a mind's view of who you are, how you are related to in our case Christ Jesus and the Trinity, and then what you are doing when you do it. This is all not just theoretical.

**MML:** There was a little dance you were doing several questions back that I think I followed really well -- I think I did. And when you ended, I thought you were using the word, God, which is just to me a word, and you were using the word, mind, and to me they were at that moment the same. Could that be?

**REV. KUSALA:** No.

**MML:** No.

**REV. KUSALA:** God is not mind in Buddhism. I'm sorry.

**SR. MEG:** Well, now, explain what you mean by God.

**REV. KUSALA:** I don't know what God is, but that word carries with it an awful lot of baggage. There is a lot of energy that's connected with that word, and if you apply that word to anything in Buddhism, you're wrong.

**MML:** The word God.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, God.

**MML:** It's just a word. Okay?

**SR. MEG:** What is the reality the word, God?

**MML:** When you both were doing this dance, you were going along in it, you did it in nice steps. And you both stopped. And you stopped at "mind," which seemed to be no effort, no suffering. You used "mind" within the process in different ways, but when you ended you were in the mind.

**SR. MEG:** Yes, the word "God" is more than ultimate mystery.

**MML:** Sr. Meg seemed teach the Trinity as the major Christian teaching about God.

**SR. MEG:** Yes, we must keep Trinity as the root belief: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But more than Trinity there is the two natures of Jesus the Christ. We know that Jesus was the name of the earthly man and that the title Christ means anointed one. We must hold Jesus and Christ together like we hold the Trinity three persons together. What is at risk if we separate Jesus from Christ is that we miss the human body being divinized by God and lifting all us up in His image and likeness. The body is sacred in Christian teachings. Through Jesus all humans are now living mystically in the Trinity. This is very deep, but it all fits together. Language doesn't capture this wonderful teaching.

**REV. KUSALA:** My job here, if I have one, is to simply explain to you how I see my tradition, and that may shine light on your tradition. But the real, real fear that I have every time I enter into a religious dialogue is that someone will make their tradition my

tradition, and my tradition their tradition.

**MML:** May I speak to that?

**REV. KUSALA:** Please, just one more thing first. Interreligious dialogue allows us to grow in many, many ways. When we question our own tradition because of something someone else said about theirs, it allows us to have that much more energy and urgency to go back to our texts, to go to our spiritual leaders and say: What does this mean to us?

We have come to a point of us and them. I'm them, and you are us. I feel comfortable with that because we are still connected. I appreciate your courage in letting the us and them come together. Most cool.

One of my fears is glossing over the differences, and only seeing the similarities, that maybe God and mind are the same thing. Certain issues need to be resolved through practice, counsel, insight and prayer. We need to stay different, but honor the connections.

Sorry I just needed to say that... Now, please, Merri.

**MML:** I can understand why you responded to me that way but that was not where I was going.

**REV. KUSALA:** I know, but it was a opportunity for clarity.

**MML:** I'm glad you said that, and I share your viewpoint, and I think the beauty of dialogue is to strengthen what you feel. However, I don't think any one faith has it.

**REV. KUSALA:** Really, what do you mean?

**MML:** I think for me, though I'm a rooted, committed Christian and have always been and never really considered anything else, I want to know the mystery as fully as I can for some reason.

Many people don't care to know, but I do. And I think that what they are pointing to is what I'm interested in, and right then you were both pointing to something, and I wanted to see if in your minds, because you were using the word, God, and you were using the word, mind, you were pointing to the same thing. So to me, in the end when we are all with God, I call God, it will be the same thing.

**REV. KUSALA:** But that leaves me out.

**MML:** Well, I think I will.

**REV. KUSALA:** I'll be in Buddhist heaven.

**MML:** I think I will.

**CEE:** My friend, you may be in for a surprise.

**KP:** But Merri is going to have a passkey to all the heavens, so she'll be able to visit me whenever she wants.

**Kusala, you made a distinction  
\_\_\_ between interreligious dialogue and interfaith dialogue \_\_\_**

**MGC:** Kusala, you made a distinction between interreligious dialogue and interfaith dialogue, and I would like to know what that distinction is.

**REV. KUSALA:** For me, when I think of inter- faith, I think perhaps protestants getting together with protestants and Catholics getting together and dialoguing. And when I think of interreligious, I think of the Hindus and Jews and Muslims getting together.

**MGC:** We would call it in the first place ecumenical, so that's what confused me.

**SR. MEG:** Interfaith tends to be, once you've kind of separated out religion, religion being the institutional manmade part of it, and the faith being your own experience of we would say God, and you would have your own experience of your path. So, I think there are three: Interfaith, interreligious, and interecumenical.

**KP:** Interdenominational maybe.

**SR. MEG:** Would be more ecumenical.

**MGC:** So interfaith is not just looking at an institution as such.

**SR. MEG:** Right. There, you would have a family of practitioners, believers, and you don't even factor out the institutional part. Religion, sociologists would say it's the manmade part of the revelation.

And more on that dialogue, we are interreligious, though, because we are under the Vatican, which is still the manmade part, but then we do interfaith dialogue in the family of the religious.

Now, we have a whole lot of questions. What I'd like to do is find out what all the questions are, find out how much more endurance we have, and then we can decide what to do.

Bunker, your question?

**RJH:** Mine is just sort of a statement about we know what the beginning of all our paths are. The question is: What's the road to the end. I want to posit three.

**SR. MEG:** Okay, he has a statement to make. Milo?

**MGC:** I just wanted to know when you were going to talk about the Christian meditation.

**SR. MEG:** I need to know when we are going to do that, too. Mary, what was yours?

**MML:** I just have a comment.

**SR. MEG:** Another comment. Don't lose it. There was somebody over here that had something else.

**BC:** You asked Kusala that question, how do you maintain the present. When you say how you maintain your presence for meditation, I want to know kind of what the comparable experience is.

**MP:** Would the two of you be willing to lead us in a Christian meditation and a Buddhist meditation and give us experience in those meditation practices?

**REV. KUSALA:** If I were to lead you in a meditation, what I would like to lead you in would be a loving kindness meditation rather than a strict Buddhist meditation, though that is a Buddhist meditation. To sit silently is a joy, but to sit in loving kindness is a miracle.

**SR. MEG:** Well, we have a rich thing now. I have about nine after twelve. Do we want to handle at least the threads, and then pick up the other themes at another time? How long do you want to go?

What's your pleasure here?

**MGC:** This evening, what are we going to have?

**SR. MEG:** We could do our meditation practice this evening, our training and meditation. I could do a teaching on meditation, and he could lead us loving kindness. Do that this evening?

**KP:** That would be great.

**LH:** I would like to suggest that because this is desert day, that we end now, and that we then pick up the other threads. You just said, "My mind is getting tired," and I think that these are very cerebral kinds of -- not that they are unimportant but they are cerebral kinds of comments, and I think it might be good to take a break, come back and talk about these things this evening, because we do have time, and we want to introduce some leisure into the day.

**SR. MEG:** Okay, thank you.



Day 3

**Sister Meg | Rev. Kusala | Q & A**

\_\_\_**Day 4 - Friday - May 2, 2003**\_\_\_

**Day Four...**

**Topics:**

**Sister Meg** - American Benedictine Monasticism, The Divine Office, The Essence of Monastic Life, The Essence of Contemplative Life.

**Rev. Kusala** - A Short History of Buddhism, Buddhism in the West, Monks and Dharma Teachers, Unity and Diversity, Ordination.

**Q&A** - Pureland Buddhism, Tibetan Mandala's, Refuge in Buddhism, Dangers in Meditation Practice.

[Sister Meg](#) | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 4 - Friday - May 2, 2003**  
**Sister Mary (Meg) Margaret**

**Topics:**

[American Benedictine Monasticism](#)

[The Divine Office](#)

[The Essence of Monastic Life](#)

[The Essence of Contemplative Life](#)

**SR. MEG:** Well, I'd like to do just a very brief companion piece to Rev. Kusala on American Benedictine monasticism and its evolution in the United States, because we've had a similar journey. And we can learn from the Buddhist, as we have.

[\\_\\_\\_This is our 25th year in monastic dialogue\\_\\_\\_](#)

This is our 25th year in monastic dialogue. I'm going to keep this to the bare bones, and then if you have questions, I'll respond to them so that we can get to our dialogue.

In the United States most Benedictine men and women came over around the year 1800, but there were sisters that came over as early as 1700 in Canada. And then an earlier group came in, the Ursulines came up through New Orleans.

Now, in the religious life world the original religious were monks and nuns under the Rule of Benedict or Augustine or Basil. And then in about the year 1050 they split between Christian East and Christian West.

The monastic tradition continued in the East more than in the West. In the West, the big split, the big reformation to the big more or less worldly monasteries was the apostolics. The first big revolution, I would say, started with Francis of Assisi. He again moved the whole religious life out of the monasteries, because he had empathy for the poor, and he had more to give.

Another big apostolic group were the Dominicans, and they were in response to right teachings. They became the order of preachers, the Dominicans, and they wore the white robes, they were outside the monasteries.

Now, in the monasteries there has been a continual -- so there is a parallel group, the apostolic religious, they are called sisters, and the monastic monks and nuns.

So, the brothers and the sisters are apostolic. They don't live in monasteries. They live in convents, and convents are little dwellings attached to their apostolic places like parishes, hospitals, or whatever. The monastics still had a monastery.

Technically, a monastery is where you can make another monk or nun. You can ordain or make final vows. You have an abbot. You are self-sustained financially, and you are buried there.

So, it's a total womb-to-tomb place, it's not dependent on the church. The church system is bishops and lay people and priests, and that's a third system. That's the big system.

The bishops have priests that have parishes, and the people are in there. Then the religious life system is the monks and nuns, we are the minority, and then the apostolic sisters and brothers. Some of those are ordained priests, but they are not monks and nuns. They are fathers usually, but can be brothers. They are Dominicans. The sisters are Sisters of Mercy, Ursulines, Immaculate Heart of Mary, Daughters of Charity.

One time I went to a meeting that Lilly Endowment sponsored up at Notre Dame. We were trying to guess who were all the sisters, who were all the monks and nuns in the United States. And nobody knew. There was no directory for monks and nuns and sisters. It was too complex. Since then some historians have made directories, but it keeps changing, it's a vast group.

**\_\_\_In about 1970, there were probably a half million sisters in the United States\_\_\_**

At one time, maybe in about 1970, there were probably a half million sisters in the United States. Now, we're down to about 150,000 sisters, monks, and nuns.

In the split when the monks and nuns in Europe became cloistered, which means the nuns especially could not go out of the monastery, they wore the entire habit, sang the entire choir, and when they came to the United States, they were not allowed to have the title, nun, because they were not sure that they could sing the entire choir. It was kind of an object of a vow.

They were called to the United States, like my community was called to teach the immigrant German children. They would have these little convents like sisters, but we had come from the lineage of nuns from Eichstatt, and Eichstatt used the Nonnberg Abbey, which is where the Sound of Music was filmed.

I was back in Nonnberg Abbey in '80's, and my room was exactly the same as the Mother Abbess. I was a Mother Abbess, then. We were getting together all the abbesses from Europe and the United States.

I asked her why we became sisters and not nuns in the United States, and she said because anybody that entered at Eichstatt and didn't have a dowry was sent to the United States. We were the poor girls, but we did really well. We now have, in my own group we have sixteen monasteries of nuns, and there's probably, let's see, probably 6,000 of us. We are just really happy little girls -- happy women, I should say.

But, anyway, we've done swell. We took a pilgrimage with Joan Chittister and some of the

others, to reclaim being nuns because we now can take the full vows of total renunciation, and now we do sing full choir, we are real nuns, and we wanted to be received as such by these mother abbesses.

When we used to go back before that meeting, we would have to stay in the guest house. But now the Mother Abbess greets us, takes us to the choir stalls, and we gave the blessing along with her giving the blessing. It is quite touching thing after 200 years of being estranged.

**KM:** Sister, what do you mean by singing the full choir?

**SR. MEG:** The Divine Office. In the United States when the sisters and nuns came over to America the burden of singing all 150 psalms and meeting for prayer 7 times a day was too demanding with their apostolic duties. They used an abbreviated form of prayer. Only in the last 50 years did nuns in this country get the privilege of praying the official divine office like the priests and the nuns in Europe. What was lost was the full statutes as nuns in Europe.

First of all, it was all in Latin and it was way too long to teach in a day and do the entire Divine Office, which was Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Prime, Lauds and Matins.

When had reclaimed it by the time I entered, we did do all the Divine Office. We did Prime and then Lauds, and we came back and did Terce, Sext and None. We did Mass, and then we did Vespers, and Matins and Compline. That was a lot of prayers, and it was in Latin in my first few years, and beautiful, but very challenging. I mean as far as timewise, we had to get up very early, and feast days were difficult, but it had to be done.

I'm going to fast forward up to, then when I became prioress, I was the fifth prioress in this rather new monastery. There were 103 nuns. And I had worked with Bishop Gettelfinger, who you met a couple of nights ago, and we had done a lot of work renewing the Catholic identity in parishes after Vatican II.

I got this major grant, I'm very proud of the Lilly Endowment for assisting us in this, being in Indianapolis.

I think it's instructive for you as Friends of Benedict to do something similar. We did it to retrieve the best of our tradition, just to look at all of it and retrieve it. In other words, bring it up to sight, look at all of it, look at what's good about being a sister, what's good about being a nun.

We brought out all the traditional things of Western monasticism, and then we would claim the parts that made sense to us. We retrieved all of it that we could. We reclaimed the best of the Divine Office, the best of the vow of poverty, the best of the vow of obedience, the best of living in common. And we've worked really hard on how to do this.

But that wasn't enough, and this is the third part. We reappropriated that which we reclaimed.

In other words, it isn't good to select out of the Divine Office or even take the best of it, but we had to reappropriate it just for Beech Grove, just for our house, what would work at our house. Even though it's the best of our tradition, it may not be the best for us.

We were at a stage, we were in a feminist mood. We didn't know if monasticism could be reclaimed for women. Could you have obedience and still be adults? You know, how did you have mutual obedience and still be collegial.

I've been listening to a person who lives in one of your houses, an Anglican house, and they sort of did the same thing. They decided to be totally democratic, and didn't reclaim the Benedictine Rule. They didn't have to because that wasn't their origin. But they also didn't take it when they got here to the United States. So, they have a totally democratic way of living their monastic life, it's here in the Midwest. I see that could work, but then as a total egalitarianism. There is no abbess that has authority.

In other words, it's not the Benedictine Rule, so you have to know, like Kusala, the Dhammapada. You have to know the teachings of the Buddha, what is the orthodox, what's the core of it.

In Buddhism there are three baskets, in his lifetime didn't he write something like --

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, it's called the Tipitaka, the three baskets. The vinaya, the sutta, the abhidamma. It's said in some languages to total a hundred books.

**\_\_\_The genius of us having the Rule of Benedict is it's enormously beneficial\_\_\_**

**SR. MEG:** The genius of us having the Rule of Benedict is enormously beneficial, because we dipped into it deeply and found that it had what we wanted. It had the lean structure. It had mutual obedience. It had the way of the vows. It had the way of prayer. It was something that we could count on. It was our centerpiece. It was the core of the monastic way of life. We still have not plumbed the depth of it.

Each harvest we find more and more in there. So, we were thrilled to death to have this very insightful book.

Other communities just don't have that. They have a founder, and they have the way he lived, but they don't have his rule. They have a lot of letters. But they don't have his teachings.

They have a lot of teachings about the teachings, and they have a lot of customs, it's hard to discriminate between the accretions and the core living of the monastic way of life, the Benedictine way of life.

So, with that as kind of an introduction, I just have three things that I think would be helpful for lay monastic spirituality. And that would be: Follow the Rule of Benedict. In other words, it's not incidental. It's not by accident that you found that to be your core.

It is a source-inspired text; that in the prologue that talks about returning to the Father who has called us, and to listen with the ear of our heart to follow those words in obedience. It's a very core document, and it will inspire and continue to inspire with great commentators, such as Esther de Waal. I can't encourage you enough to continue with that.

The first thing is to attend to taking the essence of the monastic way of life, the essence of it, but not the form. You really can't live the form of a monastery, but you can live what the form protects in the monastery. You can do everything we can do in the monastery except have a monastery.

What is it that the monastery is doing? What is cloister? Cloister is that time away, that solitude, that desert, that cell. What is cenobitic life? It's a sangha like this, of like-minded souls, so staying in touch. But it's laying out your heart to a like-minded person that knows what you are trying to do.

That's the second thing, to find lay forms to do this contemplative journey. I think only you can do that, but in the light of the Rule and in the light of those of us who live it and have found our way through the form, and you find your way to contemplative life without the form.

For example, the Divine Office is a group prayer, not an individual prayer. If we had more time, it's just too sacred to do in a short moment, lectio divina is the form of the personal prayer, not the Divine Office.

You have to find your entry into Scripture. Now, scripture, there are three revelatory texts: scripture, nature, and experience, which is your entry level. You walk there, you go through the depths of that through the literal, through the allegorical, through the dynamic and moral, and then through the unitive.

You have to plumb the depths of the lectio divina. It is a practice for the individual, and any lay person can learn lectio divina. I think protestants would be just so attuned to that because you already know it. Already live it. Now, what is the daily practice with it that anoints your contemplative way of life.

**\_\_\_Follow the Rule, find your form, that is the essence of the contemplative life.\_\_\_**

The third thing besides again -- I'm repeating, but it's so important -- follow the Rule, find your form, that is the essence of contemplative life. The third thing is to remove the obstacles to your contemplative life. That is when you live in the world but not of it. We live as monasteries in the world but not of it.

Again, there was a huge million dollar study that Lilly Endowment paid for that interviewed most of the spheres in the United States and surveyed I think a hundred thousand sampling on why was religious life falling apart today. It was a very comprehensive survey. They had a lot of meetings that had several phases and had a full- time staff for like four years to work on this.

But the net-net of that study, was why religious life was falling apart, it was indiscriminate cultural assimilation, indiscriminate cultural assimilation.

Discriminate means to choose, to sort. Diakresis is the Greek word. And you would sort, and in the sorting, again for you, you would find the parts of the culture you can assimilate and appropriate in your way of life, because you are in the world, and this world needs you as worldly people, the best of the culture.

This sounds like Paul Tillich, doesn't it, Paul Tillich was that Christ in culture.

We are the Christ, we are the face of Christ in America today, but we can't be indiscriminate in our assimilation of other cultural phenomena. And that, again, is the work of your individual discernment, your laying out your thoughts to a wise elder, and in a sangha or a community of believers, and also checking it out against the norm of the Rule of Benedict.

So, with that, Kusala and I will come up, and we'll do a little bit of listening to questions and responding and some dialogue.

Day 4

**Sister Meg** | **[Rev. Kusala](#)** | **Q & A**



**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 4 - Friday - May 2, 2003**  
**Rev. Kusala Bhikshu**

**Topics:**

[A Short History of Buddhism](#)  
[Buddhism in the West](#)  
[Monks and Dharma Teachers](#)  
[Unity and Diversity](#)  
[Ordination](#)

**REV. KUSALA:** What I would like to do in a sort of conversational way, is talk a little bit about the history of Buddhism. I'll just touch on a few points.

When the Buddha died at the age of 80, he had complete control over his doctrine. If anybody had a question about what he meant or what they were supposed to do, they could access the Buddha or his monks and get an answer.

**The Buddha, as I'm sure with Christ,  
\_\_\_ had the answers and was the ultimate authority.\_\_\_**

There was no debate, only dialogue. The Buddha, as I'm sure with Christ, had the answers and was the ultimate authority when he was alive.

But, as everyone must, the Buddha died, his relics were distributed, and the philosophers and practitioners got together and said, "Well, what did the Buddha really mean?"

Do you know how that works? It probably doesn't happen as often in Christianity --

**PARTICIPANTS:** Oh, ooooooh.

**REV. KUSALA:** Good. I'm glad that's the case.

So we have that in common. It wasn't long after the Buddha died that eighteen different schools of Buddhism arose, eighteen different ways of looking at what the founder said, what he meant, and how to practice it.

Today there is only one of those 18 original schools left, it is called the Theravada, "Doctrine of the Elders." That is what I have been sharing with you this week, the teachings of the earliest school of Buddhism.

It's the one I'm most attracted to, I feel it's the one most closely linked to what the

historical Buddha said and did, when he was alive.

Buddhism didn't just stay in India. Everybody suffers, so the Buddha sent his monks and nuns throughout the world carrying the message of why we suffer, and how to end suffering.

When Buddhism made its way to China, it got mixed with Taoism and Confucianism. The Buddhism of China is much different from the Buddhism of India. But they say, and there is a lot of truth to this, Buddhism is nondogmatic and the diversity of Buddhism found in the world today lends some truth to that statement.

When monks started to write down what the Buddha said, the Buddhist world changed dramatically, now lay people had access to the original teachings. Until then, the only people with access to the original teachings were the monks and nuns, their job was to memorize, recite, and teach.

Before the books, one monastery might learn the rules, the Vinaya. Another monastery the Majjhima Nikaya, the middle length sayings, and a third monastery might learn something like the Anguttara Nikaya, still another section of the Suttras. When monks and nuns wanted to hear all the teachings, they would gather and recite.

500 years or so after the Buddha's death, Buddhism went through a reformation. In some ways, like the Protestant reformation, it became known as the Mahayana, the great vehicle. The Theravada became known as the Hinayana. Hinayana means small vehicle. You can see the tension building between the orthodox and the reform, between -- yes, yes, I'll stop there.

(Laughter.)

I don't want to get too carried away with all this. Okay.

Now, Buddhism was doing well in China, and it moved into Vietnam, Korea, over to Japan, and became known as Northern Buddhism.

**\_\_\_The Theravada school is considered Southern Buddhism.\_\_\_**

The Theravada school of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, etc., is Southern Buddhism. In around the sixth century AD Buddhism finally made it over the Himalayas and into Tibet, it became known as the Vajrayana, the diamond vehicle. Vajrayana Buddhism brought Theravada and Mahayana together and added some of their own stuff, it's a really unique kind of Buddhism. Buddhism seems to change in every culture.

In the late 1800s, early 1900s, Buddhism came to America. It came for the most part because people from Japan and China moved to America to find work and make a living. The first temples were small and only for ethnic Buddhists.

It seems to me, a real turning point came about when Jack Kerouac, you know his story,

and the other guys and gals from the beat generation of the '40s and '50s, when they found Zen. Zen seemed to give permission to live in a free and almost careless way.

Well, that worked for a while. The scholarship back in the '50s and '60s, I can see now by comparison, was lacking in some ways, but it must have been fun and inspiring to be on that cutting edge.

One of my favorite teachers from the 60's was Alan Watts. He had such a great voice, and a really good sense of humor. Anybody with an English accent immediately sounds intelligent to me.

(Laughter.)

Alan Watts would weave stories, personal insights, and the Dharma in a very special way, he would laugh and joke, I really liked the way he understood Buddhism.

But, one of the problems as I see it, with the Buddhism of the 40's, 50's, and even the 60's, was the lack of self limitation. A lot of folks in the 40's, 50's, and 60's who came to Buddhism, just sort of pushed all the precepts aside, and sat down to meditate.

I can't talk about the 60's without talking a little bit about the hippies and psychedelics.

There is a wonderful story about Ram Dass, a famous spiritual teacher. On one of his return trips from India, he gave a talk in San Francisco. The room was filled with people who looked very much like he did -- a lot of hair, dressed in white cotton, and wearing prayer beads.

Ram Dass was speaking about his psychedelic experiences, his yoga and his meditation practice, all the different ways he explored what it meant to be him. But there in the front row, was this little old lady, she had black lace-up shoes on, and a straw hat with fake fruit.

As she listened to Ram Dass, she nodded in agreement. Now Ram Dass picked up on this, and couldn't believe she understood what he was talking about. At the end of a Ram Dass lecture, it is customary to line up and give Ram Dass a hug. I've had the good fortune of seeing him a couple of times, and even given a few hugs.

Well, now, this little old lady is about to hug Ram Dass, and Ram Dass just has to ask. He says, "Did you really understand what I was talking about?" She said, "Oh, yes, and you said it so well." He said, "But how do you know? How do you know these things?" And she said, "I crochet."

(Laughter.)

There are many paths to enlightenment.

The '60s and '70s were a fun time for a lot of folks. It was a time of exploration. Young men and women all over America were challenging their intellect and their intuition, with chemicals. Some lost their way and didn't make it. The chemical path to enlightenment is a tricky one, and it may not even work at all, as far as I can tell. The meditation, discipline, and wisdom of the Buddhist path is gradual, useful, and time tested.

Some people still advocate drugs as a way of changing consciousness and attaining freedom?

I think, if you need drugs to gain liberation, it's not really true freedom, just another kind of prison. The Buddhist path starts with a foundation of morality and ethics, adds the vehicle of meditation and wisdom, which allows access to a totally new way of being the world. A way of being free and at peace.

I also think in the late '70s and up to the end of the '80s, a giant spurt in American Buddhist scholarship happened.

**In the year 2003**

**\_\_\_we have a lot of American Buddhist monks and nuns who were born here\_\_\_**

In 2003 we have many Buddhist monks and nuns born, educated, trained, and ordained right here in America. They are now writing about their experiences for a Western audience, and in some cases even retranslating Buddhist texts. In the future Westerners may even bring Buddhism back to Asia. Wouldn't that be cool!

**PDP:** The American translation, is it any different?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, in the sense that the authors culture is in there somewhere. Buddhist scholarship in the West is second to none.

One of my favorite translators is Bhikkhu Bodhi, I believe he was born in New York, and now lives in Sri Lanka. He retranslated the Majjhima Nikaya, and many other important texts.

I find the new translations more accessible. I might be culturally prejudiced, but I like the idea we are writing about Buddhism in a Western way. In every other country Buddhism has changed, why should it be any different here?

Every year for the last nine years there has been a Western Monastic Conference, some of the pictures from the last one can be found on my web site- [www.urbandharma.org](http://www.urbandharma.org).

These are young men and women -- well, young and old-- have come together, ordained in various traditions, because there is no American Buddhism. You see Tibetan robes, Vietnamese robes, Korean robes, Thai Forest robes, etc.

They come together to talk about what it means to be a Buddhist monk or nun in America. It's realistic to say that monks and nuns in the West are in the process of defining an

American Buddhist monastic system. In the West we have different issues... Where do Buddhists monks and nuns go when they get old? What do they do for health care, etc.

A lot of monks and nuns I've talked to don't even have health care. They rely on lay people for support, doctors and dentists from their temples and center to help them. If you are a Vietnamese monk, and you have a toothache, you go to a Vietnamese dentist.

IBMC the center I live and work at, gives me health insurance. Most centers don't or can't do that, I'm very lucky to live at the IBMC.

In the West we're trying to figure out how to provide for the monastics in their old age, and keep them healthy when they're young, so they can continue to teach and practice.

**MGC:** When you said you don't have American Buddhism yet, but is this what you are developing right now? Is that the idea?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, I think that's the case.

**MGC:** What will it take to have it, so to speak?

**REV. KUSALA:** Well first of all, we need to have our own robes. That's why I alluded to blue denim the other day in a humorous way. We need our own robes. We need to have our own identity, if you will.

    We need our own robes.    

Now, when you look at what Americans usually do, they sort of take a lot of different ingredients and stir them up, the great melting pot, you know. So, I've got a feeling that we're going to take the best parts of the various Buddhist traditions, put them together, and come up with something pretty unique.

We're going to have more equality between men and women in American Buddhism than you find in Asia, that's for sure. It may take changing some of the traditional precepts, but the Buddha gave permission to do things like that.

**KM:** I have several questions about Europe, Australia, and Africa. Are they like America in that there are different groups of Buddhists but there is not, you know, like a French Buddhism movement or Nigerian Buddhism?

**REV. KUSALA:** Exactly. Same thing. Maybe we need a European Buddhism as opposed to an American Buddhism, or maybe we need both. You're right, they don't have Australian Buddhism either, with their own robes and stuff.

**KM:** What about Africa, such a huge continent? Christianity has had such a enormous growth there.

**REV. KUSALA:** I'm not aware of any African Buddhism.

**SR. MEG:** I want to interject here, what Kusala is doing, is keeping it orthodox. There are Buddhist groups that keep it simple. But it's just like the cover of the book, rather than the orthodox teaching, which is what Kusala is doing in contemporary language.

**REV. KUSALA:** Thank you. I don't want to change the Dharma. I don't want to oversimplify the Dharma, and make it something it's not. I just want to make it understandable.

**MM:** Don't you think one of the ways Buddhism is reaching a variety of people is through the prisons?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, Buddhism is alive and well in the prison system.

**MGC:** The comparison between the monk and a lay person, is this similar to the Christian?

**REV. KUSALA:** I think so. In America there are fewer people who want to be monks it seems, and more people who want to be Dharma teachers. A Dharma teacher would be more like a minister or pastor, and the monk more like a Catholic priest.

**SR. MEG:** Really more like the Catholic monk.

**MGC:** You don't have priests as such, right? You don't have that distinction, right?

**REV. KUSALA:** Not really, but some Japanese Buddhist monks may be more like priests, they are oftentimes married, have families, and drink.

**SR. MEG:** Yes, some priests can marry and drink.

**SR. MEG:** Except in the Roman Catholic tradition, but there is nothing intrinsic to being priests that you can't marry. If the Pope would change that rule tomorrow, all the priests could get married, but none of the monks.

So, it's constitutive of our monastic life to be a celibate monastic, renunciants, but not of the priests and the pastors and the Dharma teachers.

**REV. KUSALA:** We have both Dharma teachers and monks at our Buddhist center. It takes the same amount of time to be a monk or Dharma teacher at our center, but there are different precepts to follow and ways to live in the world. The precepts of a Dharma Teacher allow him or her to live in the world pretty much in a normal way.

But, if we take monasticism out of Buddhism, and only have Dharma Teachers, it's no longer Buddhism. We may need to have both in the West. I live differently than a lay person or Dharma teacher, and I'm going to have a different perspective on Buddhism because of that. Buddhism in the West will need both the Dharma teacher perspective, and

the monastic perspective in order to be effective.

**LH:** I wanted to just make sure I understand. You have monks and Dharma teachers, and you would then make the distinction that Dharma teachers are lay?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes. An advanced lay person, or in some cases ex-monks and nuns.

**LH:** But are they also paralleling in some respects priests within --

**KM:** Are they analogous to oblates? Sort of like weekend monks, would that be analogous to oblates?

Are they analogous to oblates? Sort of like weekend monks

**SR. MEG:** Yes, right, because they are not taking the monastic spirituality. They are taking a pastoral spirituality, more apostolic. I think the Hindu tradition of householder and renunciant might be a good dividing line. The householder, everything that requires, would be your weekend pastors, your weekend supply. But the renunciants pretty much are the monks and nuns.

Now, there is a big variety among the monks and nuns. Some are under abbots. Some live in communities. The vows may be different, but still I think the householder and renunciant would be a good example of this.

Would you agree with that?

**Rev. Kusala:** Yes.

**EE:** Is there a relationship between the Buddhists and the Ba'Hai?

**REV. KUSALA:** There is an interreligious relationship between the Buddhists and Ba'Hai. There is a strong interreligious community in Los Angeles. But the theology and practice is very different.

**MML:** Kusala, will you talk about unity and diversity?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes I would be happy to. Before I was ordained, I would go on more retreats than I do now. It seems I do more Dharma work than retreats these days, but that's a good thing. I was meditating, and doing retreats and experiencing unitive states of consciousness and saying to myself, "Gosh, we're all the same. There is no difference. Men, women, Christians, Buddhists, we are all one. We are all the same. Life is so beautiful."

Well that way of thinking fell apart when I asked this girl out on a date. I had just started to meditate and was seeing the world in a much different way. So, I'm talking to her about, "Gosh, we're all the same. Isn't life wonderful? Look, there's no differences at all." Well,

halfway through our date, she says, "Why did you ask me out, if we are all the same?" She was starting to get angry. So I think to myself, she's right I'm not allowing her to be a woman. I'm not allowing myself to be a man. Gosh we are different, for some reason I forgot men and women were supposed to be different.

I started to see the importance of diversity, after that date. Now, it could be just role playing, or or culture, or maybe there is a real difference in world view. Whatever the case, it's very important to be separate in relative reality, especially when you're on a date. It allows you to see and hear the other person.

So, ultimate reality is when we are connected but separate, and relative reality is when we are separate but connected.

I started to see how being different is important because it helps define our story, and our story is pretty much who we are, most of the time. Unity and diversity requires both a personal story and a cultural connection. Diversity allows you to keep your personal story, and unity is the way you connect to the culture story, that culture story leads to community.

I dislike the idea of oneness, I always use the word unity instead. Oneness leads to the idea of uniformity as being the ideal. We are all one and there is only one... But sometimes, someone doesn't fit into that oneness... What do we do with that one? Unity makes room for everybody, but still allows for a unique identity. Diversity allows for Self, and Unity allows for Selfless.

Gandhi said, "Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of our civilization."

**MM:** In Buddhism you can be married and then ordained and take the vows. In Catholicism, can you do that?

**REV. KUSALA:** You mean like a deacon?

**MM:** You can become a monk or a nun?

**SR. MEG:** Yes, and you can even get married if you are not married at the time. It depends on which order you come in.

**MM:** In the Buddhist tradition, you can be married, and have children, then later in life decide you want to become a nun.

**\_\_\_Does that happen in the Catholic Church?\_\_\_**

Does that happen in the Catholic Church?

**SR. MEG:** It does today. We don't take anybody married in our community because you



don't have total claim on their primary community. Once you are married and have family, you have another community that takes priority, and it's very difficult to renounce that community. And we say, and why should they? It's just as good as what we have.

It's always been that way among men all the way through tradition. Many a married man has become a monk at Meinrad, or whatever. The problem is with women.

In the Japanese Zen tradition, the monks all get married, and then they go to the temple on weekends. But the woman never can practice. They have to stay home and take care of the children. So, it's still a big problem to work out.

In the United States at this time, we were just hearing on the way here, we don't know any healthy intermarriage monk/nun combination. It seems to break down over and over again, and then they try it again over and over again. It's back to New Harmony, too, the Owenites.

Somewhere along life they have to provide for family and the next generation. There are more natural ways of doing that, I guess.

**JO:** The Harmonies were celibate; not the Owens, thank God.

**SR. MEG:** Thank you for that clarification.

**REV. KUSALA:** At my novice ordination in 1994 there was a Vietnamese family, a husband, wife and daughter. They all took ordination that day, and then went their separate ways after the ceremony.

I'd like to share a story about the Buddha's stepmother and how she became the first nun. The Buddha's stepmother raised him from the age of seven days, because his birth mother died. Eventually her husband the king died, and with no other obligations, she thought it might be good to be a nun.

Now, 2500 years ago if you didn't have a man in your life, you were in dire straits. She went to the Buddha, and said, "Can you ordain me? Can you make me a nun? I have no form of support. I have no man. I want to spend the rest of my life in a religious way."

The Buddha said, "I can't make you a nun because there has never been a nun in any religious tradition. If I ordain you, it might invalidate my teaching, and my teachings are very important to the world." They parted ways.

At the next village, she came up again and said, "But, I have no place to go. I raised you when you couldn't live by yourself. Why can't you make me a nun?" The Buddha said the same thing, "No. I'm sorry, but this teachings are too important. I can't invalidate them."

At the third village, his attendant, Ananda, also his cousin, was there and spoke with her first. She shared with him the story about the other two time she had spoken to the Buddha, and what the results were.

Ananda approached the Buddha, he was a very clever fellow, he asked the Buddha, "Can women achieve enlightenment?" The Buddha said, "Yes, of course."

Ananda said, "So, why can't they be nuns?"

Because of Ananda, the first nun was the Buddha's stepmother.

**SR. MEG:** We need to clarify. In your tradition, Buddhist tradition, ordained means final vows. It's not priesthood.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, that's right.

\_\_\_So, ordained means final vows\_\_\_

**SR. MEG:** So, ordained means final vows. We are having a meeting on this coming up at the end of May on nuns in the West, and that's one of our issues. By ordination, we mean very different things. Because we all make final vows in Christianity, but we can't be ordained as priests. And they can't either, in many of their lineage's, so they have to cross over to a lineage that has full ordination for women, usually the Chinese lineage.

**REV. KUSALA:** Okay one more story... So now the Buddha goes into a village, and his son and wife are there. His wife gets an idea, she says to her son, Rahula, "Go ask your dad for your inheritance. He used to be a prince. He had great wealth. Get your inheritance while he's in town."

So, Rahula runs up to his dad and says, "Dad, I want my inheritance." The Buddha ordains him.

So now his wife having lost her husband to Nirvana and her son to ordination, becomes ordained herself. It might sound odd that all his people were getting ordained; but if you are a Buddhist, ordination is a good thing, a really good thing.

Okay, really, just one more story... I remember when my teacher was dying, an an ex-nun whom he had ordained a few years earlier, came by to see him; she still felt very close to him, and wanted to see how he was doing. She had given back the ordination he had given her to get married.

After she left, he looked up at me and said, "Foolish girl, why did she gave back her ordination?"

Thank you.

Day 4

**Sister Meg | Rev. Kusala | Q & A**

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 4- Friday - May 2, 2003**  
**Questions & Answers**

**Topics:**

[Pureland Buddhism](#)

[Tibetan Mandala's](#)

[Refuge in Buddhism](#)

[Dangers in Meditation Practice](#)

**SR. MEG:** You've been very good. This is Friday, and you've worked hard.

**LDB:** You've all worked hard.

**SR. MEG:** It's been swell for us, just swell. Maybe, before we go right into our questions, can we gather all our questions first, and then we could kind of lay them, you know.

I want to ask Kusala about Pure Land Buddhism. That's one I have. What other questions do you have that we want to gather?

**BC:** I think there is a phrase about taking refuge in the Buddha and the sangha and the Dharma, and I wanted to hear maybe the idea of refuge, because so often in our Psalms we say, "You are my refuge," or we say, "My life is in Christ."

**SR. MEG:** That's interesting to see if it's the same thing.

**BC:** I'd like to see about refuge.

**SR. MEG:** I would, too. That would be good. Anything else?

**KM:** Would you talk a little bit about altered states or different levels of consciousness in your meditation, what that means.

**SR. MEG:** The altered states of consciousness in the Buddhist tradition?

**KM:** No, yours.

**SR. MEG:** In mine, okay. I'll be happy to. I'll stay in ordinary consciousness and tell it to you.

**MP:** I'd like to ask, too, are there some warnings about the dangers of this? Because I've

read -- well, perhaps in Christian meditations, too -- but I've even read of Buddhist monks who have meditated themselves to death. They've gone so far inside that they've literally starved to death.

**REV. KUSALA:** They forgot to eat, yes.

**MML:** I have a question. Meg, can you talk a little bit about in Matthew 16 when Jesus tells us to lose ourself to find ourself.

**SR. MEG:** Okay.

**MML:** Kusala, is there a such a thing as Buddhist psychology, and how does it correlate to positive thinking.

**REV. KUSALA:** Okay, good, yes.

**SR. MEG:** I'm just going to start so that we have this link about Pure Land Buddhism so that you get that catechesis.

What is Pure Land?

### **What is Pure Land?**

**REV. KUSALA:** Well, before I answer I just want to say I am not a Buddhist Scholar... My understanding of Pureland is limited, I know it's the most popular Buddhism in Asia. You don't hear too much about it in America, although they are here in force, most westerners I know seem to be drawn to the Theravada, Zen, or Tibetan Buddhism.

Pureland started around the first century, maybe a bit before. There is some evidence that it may have been in India as well, but it was for sure in China and Japan.

For me Pureland has always sounded a lot like Christianity. There is this Bodhisattva named Amithaba or Amida, who took a vow to save all sentient beings. There is even another Bodhisattva in Japanese Buddhism who choose to be reborn in hell, that's where everybody suffers. So, it's tough work to be a Bodhisattva.

Anyway, this particular Bodhisattva, Amitabha, is said to rule a heaven realm, the Pureland. Now, if you say the word "Amitabha" or "Amida" with faith, with vows, and with devotion, when you die he will personally come to your bedside and walk you up to his heaven realm, which is the best heaven in all of Buddhism. All the creatures in Pure Land speak the Dharma, and you are guaranteed to achieve Nirvana.

But there is a lot more to it, than just going to heaven. A kind of Pureland is also inside your head, a unique kind of consciousness, if you will. It's a lot more complicated than it looks at first glance. So it is about living in this world, as well as well as being reborn in the next world.

Again, in every form of Buddhism the ultimate end is Nirvana, Pureland isn't the end for a Buddhist, Nirvana is. But you can achieve Nirvana in the Pureland.

I asked my teacher Dr. Ratanasara, I said, "Why do you think so many people are attracted to this faith form of Buddhism?" And he explained to me that not everyone wants to be a scholar or a theologian. Not everyone wants to practice meditation in a Zen way, and anyway a lot of people can't because they have so many commitments in their everyday life.

If you're working hard everyday, have a family, etc. you can still find time to say, "Amitabha Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, Amitabha Buddha" in a focused way during the day, it becomes your mantra. Faith, vows and devotion to Amithabha becomes the focus of your practice and the result is a rebirth in heaven, plus a better life here and now. I never had enough faith to practice this kind of Buddhism.

Something I learned a few years ago, oftentimes in the Vietnamese Zen tradition, and perhaps in the Zen tradition of Japan as well, Zen masters will often practice Pureland and Zen. It seems, they're hedging their bet. If they don't get enlightenment in this lifetime, at least they end up heaven. Enlightenment is not a sure thing, but Pureland is, with the right kind of practice.

**SR. MEG:** I'm going to brack up just a minute. Pureland is huge. As far as the population of Buddhists, it's a big family.

A smaller family is Tibetan Buddhism in the Buddhist world. It's big in the United States, but it's not that big in the Buddhist world.

The Buddhists in Tibet started at the time of Benedict, so they are not very old, and a lot of their forms would be exactly sixth century C.E. It's the way we would have lived in the sixth century, those huge monasteries. So, they kind of got frozen as a sixth century expression of monasticism.

When the Dalai Lama invited us to Tibet, he gave us this tour, where we saw the different lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. There were four of us and four Buddhists, there was a translator, and we really did work through some of these things. We went to his sect, which was Gelupga, and that's the scholars, they do a form of debating. It was very interesting.

The other thing to remember about the Buddhists, when the Buddhist transpositioned, as you so well said, over the Himalayas and into the plateau of Tibet, they merged with the Bon tradition, and they were shamanistic. They were close to the earth, with lots of magic, lots of earth energies, many rituals, dances, symbols, and astrology.

Vajrayana is really a new derivative. It looks like it's older because of the shamanistic influence, but it's really more recent than the Theravada and the Zen.

**Could you talk about the mandala?**

Then we'll go on to refuge next. Could you talk about the mandala, all the colors and why it's striped?

**REV. KUSALA:** I'll try, I don't really have much to say, but I will share what I know... at first glance it seems to have a lot to do with impermanence.

One of the ideas of the sand mandala is, after you finish it, you destroy it. All that work, time, and effort just so it can be destroyed.

**OO:** So the object is the impermanence?

**REV. KUSALA:** That seems to be part of it. But within the beautiful colors and forms are many Buddhist teachings as well. You can see whole Buddhist path in some of the mandalas.

It's designed to be a teaching at one level. It's art at another level. It's impermanent at another level, and states of consciousness at still another. You can even reproduce the mandala in your consciousness down to the smallest detail, if you practice long and hard.

**OO:** The smallest grain.

**REV. KUSALA:** The smallest grain. And at that point, it becomes you and you become it. Now, let me say here, it takes a really long time to get to that point.

**SR. MEG:** Mandalas are really classic forms, and the Tibetans I've been with are very offended by people creating their own mandalas. They come from a structure of consciousness that they've worked hard through meditation practice to replicate.

I've known some of these Samayas, who have done the three-year meditation practice, which means you go into a building, little windows up at the top, and you don't leave for three years, three months, and three weeks, and you work with your master. It is exactly what Rev. Kusala just said, she showed me the actual mandala that she enveloped. It took her a year and a half to put it in here head, she became the mandala. It took a year and a half to really make sure that all the qualities were there, and that she could experience those qualities. Then the student needs to demonstrate by some higher state of consciousness technique that they've achieved this level of appropriating these mandalas.

They are not just ordinary mandalas. The one that I was -- a kalachakra is a mandala. The Dalai Lama took us there. It's a ten day teaching where you appropriate the mandala. Not being Buddhist, I guarded my heart, watched my thoughts, and did Teresa of Avila's castle instead, I didn't want to go in those rooms because I knew it would distort my view. But I wanted to be in the presence of this guided meditation, so I would just go chamber after chamber in Teresa of Avila's interior castle. It worked fairly well.

The Dalai Lama is such a skillful teacher. He led all five thousand people through each door of that mandala. The colors mean something, the lines mean something, and then there

are little gestures. It's very orchestrated. It's like an opera. It's extremely detailed.

It's a very skillful teacher that can, what would you call it, transmute it to you. You can't just gain it. You have to transmute it. It's a transmission.

**REV. KUSALA:** Transmission, yes.

**SR. MEG:** Next question. Should we go to refuge because that's a big question. Can you speak to Bruce's question about the refuge?

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes. I spoke about the five precepts yesterday. When you become a Buddhist, you take the five precepts: Not to kill, not to steal, no sexual misconduct, not to lie, not to consume intoxicants.

### **Life sucks without a refuge.**

But the other part of that process is to take refuge. Life sucks without a refuge.

**SR. MEG:** Is that original?

**REV. KUSALA:** No, I heard it the other day and really liked it. The Buddhist refuge is, I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the sangha: "Buddham saranam gacchami. Dhammam saranam gacchami. Sangham saranam gacchami."

You say each one three times. Taking refuge in the Buddha means I take refuge in a world teacher, a human being who achieved his full perfection through his own effort, his own insight, his own compassion. That possibility is available to me too, I am a human being just like the Buddha.

I take refuge in the Dharma. Dharma is the Buddhist teachings, first, but It's also the Ultimate Truth -- for Buddhists, capital "T," for anybody else, small "t" -- the truth on what it means to be a human being, the truth of the experience of being a human being, and the truth of how to end suffering.

I take refuge in the sangha. I take refuge in the monks and nuns as an example of how to live in the world as a Buddhist.

Now, as Sister Meg notes, the meaning of sangha has changed dramatically in America. Sangha now includes lay people. But the original translation of sangha meant only ordained monks and nuns.

This world of ours is ablaze with desire and craving, taking refuge is a way to find peace.

**SR. MEG:** I would say it's in the Psalms to take refuge. I think taking refuge in Christ is the first renunciation. It's in our baptismal vows, I follow Christ, and I say no to Satan and all



of Satan's pomp and circumstances. I follow Christ, and I go in the waters, and I'm baptized through Christ, and I rise with Christ, and then Christ becomes my way, my truth, and my life.

When I'm plunged in the waters, it was to let self die, my former way of life, and going towards evil, coming up through the waters.

Then when you are up above the waters and you are baptized, you are baptized into Christ Jesus. That's taking refuge. My refuge is Christ Jesus.

I'm very happy you raised it, Bruce, because that's the key today of these many paths converging. We must know where we take refuge, where we place our -- what was your line this morning, Mary?

**MM:** Authority.

**SR. MEG:** Your authority. What path do you give authority? What resonates with your founding life form, your center of truth.

You can take refuge in the Buddha. You can take refuge in the Christ. Now I'm listening to people taking refuge in Allah. They would never take refuge in Mohammed. Mohammed is just a prophet. He is more like Benedict.

Refuge is really -- I heard one Scripture scholar talk about the shield in battle, as a kind of a little wall. When you were wounded, they would just put you on your shield and carry you out. In one sense it's refuge in your shield. It's the way in which you fortify your life with the world, and then you are carried through that protection.

But it's critical, each one of us, first of all, that we take refuge someplace. Somewhere, we have to hand over our authority or meet our authority or surrender our authority.

The Muslims are great at surrendering. What word would you say? When you took refuge, what's the word "took" about?

**REV. KUSALA:** "Take" means to actively participate, I don't take them on faith, I take them because they reduce and eventually end my suffering. The teachings are only being offered, I have to take them. The teachings are only a prescription, I have to take it, fill it, and do it.

Some people think of the Buddha as a great physician, he diagnosed the open wound of suffering, found the cause, found the cure, and then to each and every Buddhist wrote out the prescription.

**SR. MEG:** The Hindu would have a similar theme with the guru, and would take refuge in the guru. The guru would give a transmission, the guru would take you to the other shore.

So, it seems to be a concept that is in every tradition.

**The Dharma takes us to the other shore.**

**REV. KUSALA:** The Dharma takes us to the other shore. The Buddha and sangha can't.

**SR. MEG:** The teaching does.

**REV. KUSALA:** Exactly, it's the teaching. The Buddha said, "When you see the teaching, you see me."

**SR. MEG:** "I am the way, the truth and the life," or, "The Lord is my life."

**BC:** Yes, because I think we are almost more, that it's the Christ that mediates. I'm hidden, my life is hidden in Christ.

**SR. MEG:** Not the historical Jesus, either. We are talking about the Christ, the Christic community presence now, the Christ form. It's a bigger thing than just a Jesus figure in our minds. It's definitely a total way of life.

**BC:** Logos.

**SR. MEG:** Logos, that would be close, as far as just our image, our image and likeness. The orthodox say, "Put on the mind of Christ, the image and likeness." All the language limps, but that we know it is, feels certain we can be confident in that. So, that's refuge.

Let me pick up another question. You wanted to get into the dangers of meditation practice and higher states of consciousness.

**MP:** Is there a danger also in terms of Christian meditation? I've read of some of the dangers in terms of Buddhist meditation in that they literally can become so interior that they forget to eat, they forget where they are. They'll starve to death.

**REV. KUSALA:** I'll speak just a little about that, and I'd be interested to hear about Christian meditation.

The Buddhist path has many obstacles, and one of the obstacles is mind. We try and liberate the mind, but sometimes that process of liberation can turn against us. When you alter consciousness through meditation, retreats, fasting in the desert for 40 days, things like that, stuff happens.

If you are doing that in the context of a monastery or retreat center, you have safeguards built in. One of the safeguards is a daily schedule. As Sister Meg said the other day, one of the nuns didn't show up; she was dead. Well, they were able to ascertain that one of the nuns was missing, and they went to check on her.

There could be someone who is going into a deep state of unitive consciousness because of their meditation. They might come into contact with some of their archetypes for instance, it might make them confused. The abbot or the head monk would come up, knock on the door and say, "You're late for meditation," or, "We are going to eat now." A reminder that the physical form, the body needs to eat.

The other monks might care and counsel the monk who is in that place of confusion, that place of non-clarity, before the light of reason appears again.

The teachings of the Buddha are a guide. When going through these deep states of meditation, we have something called Abhidhamma, Buddhist psychology, which by the way is very dry reading. It's nothing like western psychology. But useful in giving a Buddhist meaning to unusual meditative experiences. It's a road map of the mind.

Now sometimes, you just need to stop meditating. Sometimes, when you get to that place, and it isn't going to be healthy for you to go any further. You just need to stop meditating, and maybe get a job at Taco Bell for a while, and just find your place in the world again.

This body will always be rooted in samsara, the realm of birth and death, only mind can be transformed in nirvana. Only our consciousness can be transformed in that special way.

### **The misuse of meditation can lead to very uncomfortable results.**

The misuse of meditation can lead to very uncomfortable results.

**SR. MEG:** I'll just do a 90-second setup for tomorrow, because I think this is a big topic, and I think what I'd like to do tomorrow is start out with the fruits and the results and the effect of the dialogue and especially meditation practice, maybe if we would just go there. And we would reflect on our experience of directing others in meditation practice and what happens to them.

I'd also like to cover the vast area of dark forces, darkness, evil, and the place of facing evil, and how do you know if it's evil or if it's just psychological damage. I'd like to do a little bit more on altered states of consciousness and the place in the Christian tradition for that work, and show the different traditions that are alive today on that, and the research that's going on.

And I'd like to probably end with pointing us back to our own path again, each one of us, our own path, and some criteria by which you know you are on the right journey, that you feel confident. It doesn't necessarily mean it's easy, but there are ways in listening to others you can feel more confident that they are on the right path.

You listen to people; I listen to people. We tend to shift, and it's very scary. The question is, when are you renouncing your refuge in Christ, and when are you renouncing just your false idea of Christ for a higher good? So, what are you renouncing, and when do you know it's ego, and when is it Christ?

So, let's pick that up tomorrow, and we're ready to go home on Sunday. But those are very big topics, and I've never gotten anybody this close, so I'm looking forward to it.

Day 4

**Sister Meg** | **Rev. Kusala** | **Q & A**

\_\_\_**Day 5 - Saturday - May 3, 2003**\_\_\_

**Day Five...**

**Topics:**

**Sister Meg** - Seeking God Through the Rule of St. Benedict, The Practice of Silence, The Unskillfulness of Murmuring, Pan in Kusala's Room, Ghosts and Demons, Leadership and Humility.

**Rev. Kusala** - Spirits of the Dead, Life in the Monastery, Where Does Humility Come From, My Ultimate Authority.

**Q&A** - Where the Dharma Came From, The Pitfalls of Christian Meditation, People with Powers - Good or Evil, The Danger of Oneness, Emptiness.

[Sister Meg](#) | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 5- Saturday - May 3, 2003**  
**Sister Mary (Meg) Margaret**

**Topics:**

[Seeking God Through the Rule of St. Benedict](#)

[The Practice of Silence](#)

[The unskillfulness of Murmuring](#)

[Pan in Kusala's Room](#)

[Ghosts and Demons](#)

[Leadership and Humility](#)

**SR. MEG:** Again, we have all the time we need for whatever God wants us to do here, so I'm very pleased. But just a little further organization of what Reverend Kusala and I thought we would be doing today.

First, we'd like to close the book. We'd like to bring closure to the book, so we're going to do the last chapter on leadership and humility. And then we're going to pick up the questions that we had from yesterday about meditation practice, and we're going to come mainly through the door of Christian meditation and the difficulties in Christian meditation and some of the things we need to avoid; and many of you guide others, also, so some things that we can be of service to others on the journey.

The other thing, tonight we thought closure for each you one of you, and in a sense going around to all of us, where are we in Benedict's Dharma, where are we on the journey, you know, that we want to consolidate our learning's, lay out our thoughts to the group one to one to one to one. If there is some further clarification from Reverend Kusala and myself, we would offer it. But we were thinking this evening to be really closure without new agenda.

Okay, you can see the Buddhists' theme of this immensely rich text, this last chapter is too important to leave dangling, it is this whole dance between humility and leadership. There is such wisdom about leadership in the Rule of Benedict, but the centerpiece is humility.

**\_\_\_The force behind the Rule of Benedict is to seek God.\_\_\_**

So, I would like to start with the central controlling idea, the driving force behind the Rule of Benedict is to seek God. With a nontheist to my left I want to add, God is the word we use to point to whom we think God is, letting God be God. It is our ultimate concern. It's our total depth of heart. It's both personal and impersonal insofar as it's a mystery beyond person.

God for us is the way to say everything and each thing. It's a way, it's our heart's desire.

And for us, desire -- and, again, the great teacher about the Christian notion of desire is Gregory the Great.

I would think he would be a masterful leader to follow up on many of our conversations, if you want to go into Gregory the Great, his idea of compunction, humility, and desire is marvelous.

Anyway, to seek God. If you would come, and I hope many of you do to my monastery, walk in the door, above the door is, "Seek God." Modern, not-so-beautiful building, but it's okay. It's a brick structure.

In big letters it says, "Seek God." After the entrance you go underneath to seek God. In the seeking, we know we already have God. We know it. We feel it. We sense it. There is a presence. And yet our opportunity day after day is to continue the search, continue the seeking.

When I see the dance between humility and leadership, the leadership is to initiate and keep everybody on the path of seeking God. Humility is my deference that my whole creaturehood is to lift up my body, mind, and soul to this seeking, even though I feel I've already found my heart's desire. So, seeking God is the center.

First I'm going to say something on humility. Humility is a disposition. It's not a practice. It's outcome, of practicing silence and obedience.

Silence is what we've done here, and I must apologize for speaking during the great silence after prayers this morning. At home, after the morning prayer we're finished with the great silence, but Karl and I found ourselves chatting.

I admired the fact nobody admonished us. Your posture showed us you were meditating, and so we went outside. I've been edified with your level of silence this week.

### **\_\_\_The practice of silence has different parts.\_\_\_**

Isn't it freeing? Isn't it freeing to be silent? The practice of silence has different parts: One is to control the environment so it is silent. That's the idea behind cloister, behind times of silence, the idea of taciturnity, to refrain from speaking even good things, for the sake of greater things, our search for God.

That's the idea of the cell. Your room, your space is silent. That's the idea behind a stable place.

It took me all week to really get here totally, and of course tomorrow we go. But I feel the silence of the trees and the environment and the birds, it took a long time to seep deep into my body. There is the outer silence of the cloister cell times of silence, the space, the place, the stability of many years.

Then there's the practices of inner silence, to still that inner chatter. Basically all the

practices of silence are for when the thoughts rise, you return them to the seeking of God and away from the self, so that there is no interior chatter, all that talking to yourself. You really lay it all out. You don't repress it, but you also don't express it. You transpress it. You lift it up to our mighty God.

That's why in our practice we have to have a default God. We've got to find the place in the heart that's always the same where we take our chatter. We need a default practice.

Like when you are waiting for somebody, and you are sitting there in silence, when your thoughts start rising, where do you take your thoughts? And, again, if you do the Jesus prayer, you would take the thoughts and put them right here between the chest and back to the heartbeat:

"Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner."

So, you would bring it right here, or to a sacred word, or to the mystery, or whatever is your prayer practice, or the cloud of unknowing.

Basically, you need to have this prayer practice in order to practice silence, that's how you transpress all that inner chatter. That's the work of the monastery, the interior work. That's what we are doing under the river, we are learning to deal with that interior life.

You reduce the afflictions because afflictions are not just chatter; they are shouts. They are just absolute compulsivity. We have to reduce each affliction as they rise, and the sooner the better; when we see a thought rise into an affliction, we are even vigilant. We anticipate it. We catch it early and often, as many times as it comes, and then we even do extra practice.

This is where the idea of mortification comes in. You practice ahead of time so that you are not surprised. The other big thing about the inner chatter and the practice of silence is the absolute negation of murmuring. We are not allowed to murmur in the Benedictine Rule. It is a most corrosive practice that takes away, cancels out all of our practices, practices of common life, practices of the inner work.

Murmuring is like a cancer, it cannot be tolerated in ourselves or in others, so we have to detect it. We really can't listen to it.

**BC:** What is murmuring?

Murmuring -- thank you, you want to know what it is. What would you say, Bruce?

**BC:** Complaining.

**SR. MEG:** Complaining, eating away ever so slightly.

**BC:** Negative chatter.



**SR. MEG:** It's pretty hard to murmur here because this place is so great. But at home it's, "Oh, so we're not having any good food today," same old food.

**RC:** Outward murmuring or inward murmuring or both?

**SR. MEG:** Both.

**RJH:** Grumbling.

**SR. MEG:** Grumbling. We are so used to it in our culture, but it is absolutely devastating to our common life, and it's devastating to our interior peace, because again what are you doing inside is murmuring, instead of accepting and seeking God.

[We've had chapters to guard our heart and watch our thoughts from murmuring.](#)

We've had chapters to guard our heart and watch our thoughts from murmuring. We put up a list of what we murmur about, and then we are going to guard each other against it. We really work on it, because it can tear a group apart.

I have a very dear friend in the community, and we check in with each other every day, and we don't allow each other to murmur. She'll stop me, or I'll stop her and say, "Look, we can't go there."

We've had some years where we don't like the superior, and so we stop immediately and say, "No, we can't go there." Or we have a couple of things that are weaknesses in our community, and we have a little code about saying, "That's the weakness." But we don't go there, because we just can't allow ourselves to be taken down.

Now, you are probably saying, but what if there is a weakness that you should speak to and have the courage? That's something different, and comes from the place of peace, it has the ring of truth. It's not the self-centeredness of murmuring.

Sorry to go on about that.

**KP:** It's important. It's important.

**CEE:** We got a message from Brother Timothy from Holy Cross, who years ago came to our parish for a week. He came to our staff meeting of around twenty people, we asked him what he thought at the end. He said "Too much murmuring." We were astonished, because it was a way of talking, a cynical way of talking, but we made an important changes after that.

**SR. MEG:** I'd like to share something with you. Kusala wanted to give me a tour of his house. He has been staying at the Gate House, and I've been staying at the dorm, they are different residences entirely.

Can I tell them about last night, Kusala?

**REV. KUSALA:** Okay, sure.

**SR. MEG:** He didn't sleep a wink because he felt a presence in there, he wanted me to go and see if I felt the presence of others as well, we were going to get in the questions and answers period.

So, I went to his house, and he showed me around. He told me he moved bedrooms because one bedroom was particularly spooky.

There is this piece of art, and he wanted to know what I thought of it, I looked at it and thought it was dark. So, then, on the way back, I was saying, "How can we bring this up" -- now, it's an example of murmuring. We didn't like this piece of art, it sent a dark message. But how do you say that in a way that's not murmuring, you know?

Now, I just murmured, didn't I?

**JO:** Have a dialogue about it.

**SR. MEG:** You have a dialogue about it, that's correct. So, that's exactly what we did. On the way back we said, it's got to be there for a good reason because everything else in this whole complex has harmony. And what is that, and why was it there-- so, we had a dialogue.

Maybe it only offends us because we don't understand it, it just doesn't fit our lifestyle as renunciants or something. So, we tried to speak of it not the way I started out saying we didn't like it. How can you share something without negating it?

So, that's the whole challenge in letting things be because they just are. Also, we had a talk about the Psalms. Kusala found the Psalms to be a little dark. So, again, it's just about being skillful.

Yes, Kusala.

**REV. KUSALA:** Sister Meg and I decided it was part of our training. That's how I came to acceptance with the picture. If I may, just a few more thoughts about it.

After last night and my presentation, I was very still inside, and my breathing was very obvious to me. One of the things I have found about old houses and this one in particular is that they are very much alive.

**JO:** Oh, yes.

**REV. KUSALA:** When you go into a new place, for instance, hotel or motel, it's sterile, it

hasn't been lived in enough to really give off any energy. But I'll tell you what, the Gate House, if any one wants to experience energy, it's filled with it. It's really neat, but it's also a bit distracting.

**JO:** Which work of art, tell me, I'd love to know what you found difficult?

**REV. KUSALA:** The work of art is in the lower bedroom. My interpretation of the art -- now, I don't know that much about art, but it seems to me to be a picture of Pan.

**JO:** Yes.

I would have preferred Christ or the Buddha.

**REV. KUSALA:** It was a bit disconcerting. I would have preferred Christ or the Buddha. But to see Pan, it was just unexpected. Sr. Meg and I --

**JO:** He invented the flute with the reed.

**SR. MEG:** But the flute was turned back upon itself.

**JO:** Well, Picasso -- that is a Picasso.

**SR. MEG:** It's a Picasso, oh.

(Laughter)

**RJH:** Talk about dark energy.

**JO:** He was full of jokes. Full of jokes and full of tricks.

**KP:** There is a lot of humor in it.

**JO:** He did a wonderful sculpture of a baboon, and for the nose he used a little metal car, a little toy car, and it works. It works. But Picasso, I think he was, or at least claimed to be a Communist, you know. He joined the Communist party, but in his heart I don't think he was.

Guernica is perhaps the greatest painting in the world today. It was the destruction of this little town that meant a lot to him. And at the top of Guernica, you see a dove struggling to --

**SR. MEG:** Free itself?

**JO:** -- free itself from all the chaos, the bombing, and people weeping and wailing. The dove is pointing toward the west to get out of this morass. Some of his Communist

comrades said, "That's not a dove. It's a chicken." But he said it was a dove.

**SR. MEG:** Well, you'll have to tell us, Jane, what the redeeming comedy is, of this picture. We couldn't find it.

**JO:** The what?

**SR. MEG:** The redeeming, noble part. We couldn't find the nobility of it. Of course I didn't know it was a Picasso, thank the Lord.

**JO:** It's just Pan playing his flute. I hear the first notes of a reed pipe. And, you know, Pan means universal, anyway. It also means panic. It could be derived, you were seeing the panic part of Pan.

**SR. MEG:** Maybe we panicked.

**JO:** Because, we've evolved from Pan, because he was the beginning of man and nature together. Like Pan-Europe, Pan-American, I think pan also has a universal derivation, the etymology of pan.

**SR. MEG:** The crossover from one to the other, I know.

**JO:** I think I can see where you would say, what is this painting doing here.

The first retreat we had was by Father Ewald in California, he was all in blue -- he belonged to a healing order that wears blue. We were all told to keep silent for a couple of days and meet in the Gate House for Christian prayer and healing.

There was a young Jewish boy called Marty Bason who lived on that street, a very orthodox Jewish boy, and he asked if he could join our retreat. Of course, we were only too happy to have him.

We were told from the outset to keep silence between prayers, and the only one who obeyed, was the Jewish boy. He had been better disciplined. He had an interesting career. He was a symphony conductor of the Siena orchestra in Italy, a beautiful young boy. Went to Bloomington, great music school. He was the only Jew, and a beautiful boy. I loved him. Since gone. He kept silence.

There has been prayer in that house. Kevin Moore stayed there. You saw his photograph? That blessed man. It's been prayed in.

Then those flutes of Pan in the reeds. I don't know, take it lightly.

**SR. MEG:** Thank you. Thank you. We will do that.

Again, notice how we've gone full circle on this -- instead of murmuring -- with

understanding and with greater compassion, with greater openness, open our hearts to the reality. Again, it was in the light of he didn't sleep all night because of --

**JO:** You can always move the picture, take it out.

**REV. KUSALA:** No, no it's not just that. The whole house is filled with energy, it's not bad energy or good energy; it's almost like a living organism.

**SR. MEG:** It's too alive.

**REV. KUSALA:** It's very alive, and it keeps stealing my attention. Every sound, every creak of the floor boards, the wind. It's a marvelous old house. There is just a lot of activity occurring, but I'm having a good time.

(Laughter)

**JO:** But you are not sleeping. That's not fun when you can't sleep.

**REV. KUSALA:** Well, I can sleep when I get back to Los Angeles. This is a wonderful opportunity to explore different levels of reality.

**SR. MEG:** It's training. It's good training, what to do with your silence. You know, Kusala was actually kind of excited about it.

**REV. KUSALA:** I was silent; but the house wasn't.

**SR. MEG:** I hope this wasn't bad taste to raise that.

**JO:** Oh, I love it. I love it.

**SR. MEG:** Karl?

\_\_\_Every year I have the same experience with the Poet's House.\_\_\_

**KP:** I was just going to say, every year I have the same experience with the Poet's House. It takes me a couple of days to be able to sleep a full night in there because there is just so much going on.

**REV. KUSALA:** So, you understand.

**KP:** Yes, definitely.

**SR. MEG:** You know, we are going back to Indianapolis via Gethsemani because I want to get that book, Gethsemani II, I put together, and give it to the abbot. I never sleep at Gethsemani. It's too much spiritual activity for me, and I access that. They are up at 3:00.

I don't get into my deepest sleep until 11:00.

I'm there a lot because that's where my journal comes out of. It's not that it's bad energy; it's just too much energy, and I feel it. So, it's no place for me to rest, but I certainly come out with higher vibrations, quicker vibrations, and my mind goes quicker. It would be a good place to write for me, I suppose.

Okay, Shall we continue?

Well, that's murmuring. It's murmuring shifted into dialogue, shifted into communion. We understand each other. That's the fruit of non-murmuring, like thinking something against someone rather than sharing it out loud.

The other way of practicing humility is obedience, you practice obedience through accountability. We literally are subservient. That means we place ourselves under someone. It isn't just mutual. It isn't just a partner. Really and truly, you bow before someone and give permission: "Please tell me, because I do not know." "What do you see?"

You say, this is what's on my heart. As someone on spiritual journey, we have to hand over. That's the idea of obedience, we need to listen.

We can't really speak it by ourselves, because we keep going into this loop. We need somebody to break through like God does. But God uses human channels. We need to be accountable to somebody, to manifest ourself to that somebody, both our external actions and our interior thoughts.

Obedience is always known by its fruits of service. Through obedience, we serve others. We put ourselves at the back of the line in order to serve. In Benedict's Rule, we serve the poor, the elderly, the young, the old, the outcasts, the stranger, whatever.

**\_\_\_To recapitulate, humility is a disposition.\_\_\_**

To recapitulate, humility is a disposition. You can only practice humility through silence and obedience. If you did have humility, what would it look like? It would show up in your speech, in the way you speak, in what you talk about, and your refraining from talking, so taciturnity, which means to refrain even from good things for the sake of God. You would undergo hardships with sweetness. You would gladly take the last place, not because it's the booby prize, but because it really is the way you like to live your life.

We can guard our hearts and watch our thoughts better in last place than we can in the first place.

Besides our inclination, humility shows in our bodily appearance. It should show in our walk, the absence of a strut, and noisy colors in clothes and shoes. Harmonious colors in clothes that lead others, not the clashing thing.

It should show in our speech, our listening, the deference, the cadence, the lack of any harsh words, swear words, or denigrating words. It should show in our eyes by the way we look at one another, the way we let another person greet us and we return. It should show in our entire manner of life.

Where we put our body really matters. What we do on vacation, what we do in our time off, how we conduct ourselves in our cell, in our room, in our car, in our work. Our bodies are a window. If you want to know how you are doing, check out your body, the way it's in a chair, the way it lays in bed, the way it eats at a table.

The body does matter.

I'd like to move to the other theme in the chapter on leadership. Benedict was so powerful about leadership. It's what he doesn't say, more than what he does say, that gives him the edge-on.

He set the dynamic of leadership in the whole monastic world. He believed in rank, roles, control, and focus on the least. He took a big stand on the way an abbot is elected. He made sure that the abbot was both a spiritual leader and an administrator.

Over and over it's happened that they'll elect an abbot who is a spiritual leader but not an administrator, or they'll elect an administrator but not a spiritual leader. The very person must have both qualities for them to bring people to seeking God, because the temporal goods of a monastery are oriented toward the spiritual gift.

You must be able to skillfully uphold the resources for the sake of what we're doing under this river. But you still have to be smart enough above the river to be solvent and to have a place of beauty and a place of order and a place of tranquility. So, it's a very delicate task to be a leader.

Now, the roles is where he stores the quality of persons, so in those chapters about a prior, about the treasurer, and about the liturgical ministers, the people that serve in the kitchen, and even about the priest who serves the community.

I'd like to point out one role that I find extremely insightful, and that is the senpectae. It's kind of buried in the Rule, but it's to send a wise elder. It's in the chapters on the code of excommunication, code of conduct.

When somebody has been really out of line, instead of him coming in right away, or her coming in right away, confronting the person, you are supposed to do it gently, not break a bruised reed, and all that, you send a senpectae. That's a wise elder, somebody that they would listen to, to try to coach them and to change them. It may take a year or two to bring that person around.

I know when I was prioress, I literally took some people out of their jobs in order to minister toward somebody else to bring them back, to take trips, give them plenty of money, to get a car, go there, bring them back, however long it would take, a week, a

month, to really be there for them. Whereas, if I would go as an abbot, they would just go further away when they were alienated.

**\_\_\_This idea of a senpectae is a marvelous tool to bring harmony to the group.\_\_\_**

This idea of a senpectae is a marvelous tool to bring harmony to the group. It even works when somebody pouts and runs out of the room. Just send somebody later. "Would you mind going to the room and checking on them, and just be there for them." So the senpectae.

It's holding dear somebody who is alienated. In the sixth century they had this kind of dynamic. There really isn't much new under the sun?

I'm pointing out the senpectae role, but he also he also took stern control. He had these default positions of compassion, but as the abbot, then he drew the line of what was following the Rule, what was not following the Rule, and then going and -- what would you call it -- sanctions. In other words, there are penalties, there are some consequences of not following the Rule, and then keeping those lines clear.

It's a culture with boundaries that I live in, to have the combination of the senpectae and the role of the abbot, keeping the control, and making the controls very clear, but also having somebody that does the compassionate role. But you do it as a collaborator.

I would just end this little section with this, his big genius showed up in the election procedures. Before Benedict, the bishops, there were just abbots like Augustine and Basil. He is the one who separated out the church role of bishop. In fact, he allowed priests to be in the monastery, but only as monks, and then they served as priests in the service role. So, he clearly demarcated the difference between the bishop and the priest function compared to the monk.

The monk is mainly for contemplation and to do the under-the-water work. He did not want bishops and priests to be the abbots, and he didn't link ordination as a requirement.

He also learned from Pachomius, who was an abbot, he drew together people in a monastery. He was kind of the first one to do the community type of monastic way of life, but Pachomius made a mistake.

He thought if he lived the ideal monastic life, people would see him and imitate. He has marvelous stories about how it did not work. Finally he got so frustrated, he had this ceremony where he and the monks processed out the monastery gates, everyone thought it was just a ritual. But, he ran back and locked the gate, and nobody could get back in. He had locked himself in the monastery, and he stayed there and wrote the Rule of Pachomius. When people came through the gate, they had to agree to follow the Rule. So, there is a need for a rule that everybody follows, and it needs to be free standing from whomever is the abbot.

Another thing we learned from Pachomius, Pachomius wanted his favorite monk,



Theophane, to be his successor. Well, it didn't work because no one liked him, and so then the community fell apart. Notice, there are no Pachomian monks today. So, you can't do succession in the Christian tradition, because there is no lineage. There is no guru. There is no transmission.

He instituted the idea of electing the best person from the ranks. But once elected, the abbot had the final say. It's really not very democratic. It's one of the last aristocracies left. It's a collaboration, there is mutual obedience. But for the abbot, the abbot does have a lot of power and control.

There are two controls. One is the chapter. The chapter is the whole assembly, the greater things are to be taken to the chapter. It also has a built in council, the lesser things are to be taken to the council; which is just the opposite of most groups. The council is more like an administrative team, as it were. So, the abbot selection was definitely the genius of Benedict.

To conclude this part, his leadership shows in very specific concrete ways. We know nothing about how Benedict looked, what his personality was like. We've got the dialogues of Gregory, which are rich in their meaning. But as far as personality, we know he was a Latin, and he was of upper class; at least he was training to be a lawyer, things like that.

But the Rule is ingenious. So, my conclusion to the chapter on humility and the chapter on leadership are to say a leader has to be the utmost example of humility.

Thank you.

Day 5

**Sister Meg** | [Rev. Kusala](#) | [Q & A](#)

**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 5- Saturday - May 3, 2003**  
**Rev. Kusala Bhikshu**

**Topics:**

[Spirits of the Dead](#)

[Life in the Monastery](#)

[Where Does Humility Come From](#)

[My Ultimate Authority](#)

**REV. KUSALA:** In my tradition Vietnamese Zen-- Please excuse this digression before I get into my planned presentation -- once a year we have something called ullambana. Ullambana is when we call the lost and confused spirits to our center. We have bamboo outside the front door, the rustling of the bamboo seems to catch the attention of the spirit world. We have two wooden clappers that we bang together. That catches their attention, too. We are asking the spirits to come to our zendo, and listen to the dharma, and be reborn either as a human being or in the heaven realm.

**I remember a story about the founder of IBMC... Thich Thien-An**

I remember a story about the founder of IBMC... Ven. Thich Thien-An was contacted by an apartment owner. He said, "I cannot rent this apartment because we've got some rascal spirits here, they won't leave the tenants alone. Can you come over and take them back to your Buddhist center?"

So, Ven. Thich Thien-An and two of his monks went to the apartment house, did some special rites and rituals, they chanted all the way back to the center, calling the spirits to follow. After that, the spirits were no longer in the apartment and the manager was able to rent again.

**JO:** He exorcised them.

**REV. KUSALA:** What better place for spirits to go than to a Zen center where they can hear the teachings of the Buddha, and finally have a good rebirth.

Okay, I want to talk about humility and leadership. It may not be obvious who or what our leader is, so I'd just like to just read a few paragraphs from this book, The Word of the Buddha.

In the Buddha's own words:

*"But whatsoever there is a feeling, perception, mental formations or consciousness, all*

*these phenomena he regards as impermanent, subject to pain, as infirm, as an ulcer, a thorn, as misery, a burden, an enemy, a disturbance, as empty and void of an ego; and turning away from these things, he directs his mind towards the abiding thus.*

*"This verily is the peace. This is the highest, namely the end of all formations, the forsaking of every substratum of rebirth, the fading away of craving, detachment, extinction, Nirvana. And in this state he reaches the cessation of passions.*

*"And his heart becomes free from sensual passion, free from the passion for existence, free from the passion of ignorance. 'Freed am I.' This knowledge arises in the liberated one, and he knows: Exhausted is rebirth, fulfilled the Holy Life; what was to be done, has been done; naught remains more for this world to do. Forever I am liberated. This is the last time that I am born. No new existence waits for me.*

*"This verily is the highest, holiest wisdom, to know that all suffering has passed away. This verily is the highest, holiest peace: Appeasement of greed, hatred and delusion.*

*"I am is a vain thought. I am not is a vain thought. I shall be is a vain thought. I shall not be is a vain thought. Vain thoughts are a sickness, an ulcer, a thorn. But after overcoming all vain thoughts, one is called 'a silent thinker.' And the thinker, the Silent One, does no more arise, no more pass away, no more tremble, no more desire. For there is nothing in him that should arise again. And as he arises no more, how should he grow old again? And as he grows old no more, how should he die again? And as he dies no more, how should he tremble? And as he trembles no more, how should he have desire?"*

*"Hence, the purpose of the Holy Life does not consist in acquiring alms, honor, or fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart, that verily is the object of the Holy Life. That is its essence. That is its goal.*

*"And those who formerly in the past were Holy and Enlightened Ones, those Blessed Ones also have pointed out to their disciples this self-same goal, as has been pointed out by me to my disciples. And those who afterwards in the future will be Holy and Enlightened Ones, those Blessed Ones also will point out to their disciples this self-same goal, as has been pointed out by me to my disciples.*

*"However, disciples, it may be that after my passing away, you might think: 'Gone is the doctrine of our master. We have no Master more.' But thus you should not think, for the Law, the dharma, and the Discipline, the vinaya, which I have taught you, will after my death be your master. Let the dharma be your light. Let the dharma be your refuge. Do not look for any other refuge."*

*So said the Buddha.*

*One time Buddha was walking on a tour with a large group of monks, when he came to a town of the Kalamas called Kesaputta. The Kalamas of Kesaputta thought: It is very good indeed to see awakened ones such as these.*

*And so they went up to the Buddha and said, having seated themselves to one side, the Kalamas of Kesaputta, "There are, Buddha, sir, many different teachers that come to Kesaputta. They illustrate and illuminate their own doctrines. But the doctrines of others, they put down, revile, disparage and cripple. For us, sir, uncertainty arises and doubt arises concerning them. Who indeed of these venerable teachers speaks truly, and who speaks falsely?"*

*"It is indeed fitting, Kalamas, to be uncertain. It is indeed fitting to doubt. For in situations of uncertainty, doubts surely arise. You should decide, Kalamas, not by what you have heard, not by following convention, not by assuming it is so, not by relying on the texts, not because of reasoning, not because of logic, not by thinking about explanations, not by acquiescing to the views that you prefer, not because it appears likely, and certainly not out of respect for a teacher. When you would know, Kalamas, for yourselves that these things are unhealthy, these things when entered upon and undertaken incline towards harm and suffering, then, Kalamas, you should reject them."*

So as Buddhists, who do we listen to, who is our leader, and where does our humility come from? As you recall awhile ago, I was speaking about how monasteries were put together, and certain groups of monks memorized certain talks or rules or Buddhist psychology. You would go to one monastery to hear this sutra and one monastery to hear that sutra. When all the monasteries came together, you had the entire teachings of the Buddha.

In days of old, monks, who wanted to learn the teachings of the Buddha, would have to go from monastery to monastery, because each monastery became a specialist in a part of the doctrine. But no one monastery had the entire teaching's of the Buddha until it finally was put to paper. It's a tradition that monks would stay in a monastery for a few months or even a few years, and then journey to the next one, and then to the next one. Sometimes they found a teacher, and sometimes they didn't. The teacher needed to accept you as a student, and you needed to accept the teacher.

But in the end, you had to leave both your teacher and the monastery, go off on your own, become a wandering monk. The world is filled with so much suffering. In the early days of Buddhism you were allowed to stay with other monks for only three months during the rains retreat. The other nine months, you were encouraged to wander from village to village, city to city, state to state, country to country.

The monasteries were set up with an abbess or abbot, they were the monastery administrators. Some monks and nuns really like doing that stuff, being in charge, most don't.

Some monks were the scholar monks, their job was to teach the younger monks about the teachings of the Buddha. Some monks would cook, those were the monks you wanted as your friend. Some monks would simply sweep, clean, and practice. Then you had the elite monks, the ones that only meditate. They were not to be distracted from their focus of meditation and liberation, they were left alone.

**\_\_\_In every monastery there are many things to do.\_\_\_**

In every monastery there are many things to do. No monastery can run by itself. Even where I live at the IBMC in Los Angeles. You know, the houses are all 100 years old. Nails literally fall out of the side of the building. We pick them up and pound them back in. Constant maintenance is necessary to keep any center running. We have animals, birds, fish, cats, dogs, yards to mow, gardens to weed. And we are always looking for ways to raise money to keep the place going.

Our abbess Ven. Karuna Dharma, is in charge of making sure we have enough money to run the center, she directs the religious training as well. She has been doing this now for many years now, she is good at what she does, and likes to do it. The rest of us are less concerned about how the center runs and more concerned about teaching, or study, or whatever.

Is she the ultimately authority? Well no , she does have realitive authority over the center. The abbot keeps a temple going, so monks and nuns can have a place to live and practice. He or she is in charge of the daily life at the temple, but is not be considered the ultimate authority in Buddhism. Even the Buddha can't be an ultimate authority, because according to the early Buddhist tradition, he's dead. The sangha, the monks and nuns that we practice with, and even our teachers walk beside us, not in front us.

So who is this ultimate teacher, this ultimate authority? As the Buddha himself said, turn to the dharma, to my teachings. Teachers help define the words of Buddha, but teachers are never the Buddha, they are the messenger. At any point in our journey, we have the option of agreeing or disagreeing with them.

It must drive the teachers nuts, huh? The students have the last word.

When we find a teacher -- I have had two in my 24 years of practice -- when we find our teacher, they become our spiritual friend. They uplift us when we're down, and they push us down when we are up. They encourage us to continually look within, to find that place of balance, that place of peace, that place of wisdom and compassion. They encourage us to practice meditation, and to study the texts. So, speaking as a Buddhist monk, I have three things that are really important to me: The Dharma, my teacher, and my practice of the precepts.

My teacher of sixteen years passed away a couple of years ago. I'll never be able to replace him. But I have the dharma and my monastic precepts. I have to say though, almost everyone in the world has become my teacher in some way. Some people teach me what to do. Some people teach me what not to do. Though I need to be clear about which is which. In paying respect to all my teachers, I often bow lower to the people that teach me what not to do.

**\_\_\_But where does my humility come from?\_\_\_**

But where does my humility come from? How can I be humble and play the blues harmonica?

(Laughter)

Well, I've thought long and hard about this. At the IBMC where I live, I practice bowing a lot, and every time I bow, I see my ego. Every time I bow, I feel resistance, I feel pride. Very hard to get rid of pride, and I need to, I live in an economy of generosity. My well being depends on humility.

Where does my humility really come from? Well deep down inside, there is no one thing or event to be proud of; every time I try to find the thing that people are praising or blaming, I come up empty handed. There is really no me there, just a conditional process, caused by mind and body.

Most of all, I feel humble because I will get sick, old, and die just like everyone else. That no matter, what I do in this life, how much I practice, or how enlightened I might become, I will die. Some of my practice is just letting go, letting go of all the praise that might come my way and all the blame that is sure to follow.

**I think the ultimate authority in Buddhism is the Dharma, his teachings.**

The ultimate authority in Buddhism is the Dharma, the teaching's of the Buddha. Though abbots, scholar monks, cooks, and mediators all play an important role in the life of a monk.

Suffering is my constant companion in this world of samsara, I guess that's how it works, until I reach enlightenment. But out of suffering, sickness, old age, and death comes humility and a connection with all the other human beings that walk this earth.

The Dharma is my refuge, the Buddha my teacher, and the sangha my friend. When all is said and done, after 24 years of practice, Self is becoming more like a tool and less like a master.

Be well and happy.

Thank you.

**Day 5**

**Sister Meg | **Rev. Kusala** | Q & A**



**Benedict's Dharma 2**  
**Day 5 - Saturday - May 3, 2003**  
**Questions & Answers**

**Topics:**

[Where the Dharma Came From](#)  
[The Pitfalls of Christian Meditation](#)  
[People with Powers - Good or Evil](#)  
[The Danger of Oneness, Emptiness](#)

**JO:** Who did the Buddha believe his scriptures and wisdom were coming from? Most of us will say it all came from God. But where did his wisdom come from? Where did he claim the source of his wisdom and his Buddhahood?

**REV. KUSALA:** From his personal experience and insight.

**JO:** Only experience and insight?

**REV. KUSALA:** Through his effort, wisdom, and compassion.

**JO:** Effort, yes.

**REV. KUSALA:** There is no rest when your freedom is dependent on effort, wisdom, and compassion. The Buddha was a remarkable man. He never gave up.

It's said that Mara -- Mara is sort of like your devil, but Mara is not ultimately evil. Mara is more like a little rascal who comes and steals your wisdom and you end up doing stupid things and suffering. The Buddha was, sitting under the Bodhi tree, and Mara, the great tempter, came and said, "I'll give you my daughters."

To gain the strength necessary to deal with Mara, the Buddha touched the earth, and the earth became his witness. He was able to sidestep the temptation that Mara tried to seduce him with. Mara, the great tempter, failed.

Well, Mara looks at the world now and says, Well, if one person can do it, gosh, maybe everybody can do it, so I'm going to have to work that much harder to prevent people from reaching nirvana.

Mara comes and visits me all the time. I was down at the little store in New Harmony, and Mara told me to buy a Hershey's with almonds, and I did. That wasn't very wise, but it sure tasted good. Mara is always sitting on my shoulder. Mara's on one side, the Dharma on the other. I'm right in the middle, struggling away. It's my choice, the Dharma or the Drama.



\_\_\_It's my, choice the Dharma or the Drama.\_\_\_

**JO:** I see a very distinct difference. I feel that I cannot do it alone; that I must have a power higher than mine. That's a big difference.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes. I feel I can do it with the help of the Buddha, Dharma, and sangha.

**JO:** Wouldn't you say that's a cardinal difference? Oh, my, help me. I am nothing. I am weak without you. Help me. All your angels, get them lined up and help me.

**REV. KUSALA:** Well the big paradox is, we also realize we can't do it through self, because there is no one there to do it. Self cannot attain nirvana, in the end it happens because of conditions. Self can set up the conditions, but then it has to walk away.

**SR. MEG:** You were going to ask me a question.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes. Sr. Meg, yesterday we had many questions about the pitfalls of Christian meditation, and I was wondering if you could share with us your experiences and your insights on that subject.

**SR. MEG:** Okay, I knew that this time would be very brief, so I'm going to ask you to indulge me, I need to be very direct. If we were starting, or you were a group of spiritual directors or even my own community, I'd be a little bit softer. I'm going to be just as direct as I can.

First I'd like to say Jane's question at the end was a critical question for the Christian tradition. She even had a pointing to this higher power; that she lifts up her humble self to God, and then in humility would receive. She kept asking Kusala, what's the source of the Buddha's wisdom; and Kusala kept saying, "His own effort, wisdom, and compassion," you know. And then she said, "Well, who's home?" And he said, "There's nobody home." So, notice the two parts there. There is nobody there, and there is nobody here.

Now, in the Christian tradition, Jane also said with astute perception, that's exactly the opposite of the way we come at this. It's not wrong, but there are two truths here. He starts with the unitive; that there is only emptiness, and in the emptiness, there is really nothing.

**REV. KUSALA:** Yes, exactly.

**SR. MEG:** So, there is an emptiness. That's hard for us to grasp. We start with God being our creator, and we are a creature, so we start with duality. Well then, who brings us to this unity is Christ, and Christ for Christians is not negotiable. Jesus the Christ is not negotiable. If Jesus was human, who was the Christ, brings us to this, through the Holy Spirit, brings us to this same place or the same experience, this unity.

Now, meditation leads us to this experience of unity, even the experience of unitive

consciousness, so sometimes we feel this oneness. But our training is lacking in emptiness training. So the danger for us is in the oneness, you think you are God. It feels like God is in the center, and then you start acting out of your center. The question is: Is it God, is it me, or is it emptiness?

**\_\_\_The danger for us is in the oneness.\_\_\_**

The training is to be empty so that God works through us, which is a very advanced level of meditation practice. But if you do it too quickly, it can become a big problem.

Now, that's the whole story, but let me go through the steps.

When you start meditating, there is an introduction to the practice, and you start feeling, and you get your practice, maybe Christian meditation, maybe a centering prayer, maybe a Jesus prayer. There are Christians that go to Hindu practice, a lot of body practice, yoga practices that also does the same thing.

The most skillful Catholic priest I know that does a Hindu practices through Christianity is Tom Ryan, he's at St. Paul Church in New York. He is very skillful.

All right, you start your practice. You feel body and mind as being one. You have the sense of mind slowing down and clearing up. These are just side effects: You are more balanced. Your health improves. Your body is more limber. You renounce your sins. Some people give up smoking. Your sex life gets ordered. Your food intake is moderate. There are lots of good side effects to meditation.

But then very soon, after about three months the difficulties start rising. The first difficulty is, it takes a lot of strength to practice, you start to see how much strength it takes to get started every day, to wake up an hour earlier. It's hard to practice when you're sick, to stay in a posture, to get your room set up so that it's quiet. The strength needed to practice is enormous, you might even need a meditation group to help you practice.

The second difficulty that arises when you're doing your practice is, it is no longer as sweet. Difficulties start rising. The afflictions rise stronger and harder. You become more grouchy, not less in your home life, and you start saying, "Wow, what's happening?" Your practice is breaking up levels of your subconscious, this newly released energy floats up from your unconscious to your conscious. Sometimes when you sit in meditation you might break down crying or start laughing, you can't seem to control yourself-- stuff just happens, and your thoughts become wild.

The third stage is when there is the unloading of the unconscious. Thomas Keating has a lot of training with the false self system breaking up, you just continue to unload and all that. It's normal in meditation. It just happens. But sometimes there are problems.

Now I'm going to stop here for a moment, and go through six problems with meditation, and then I'll get back to the difficulties.

The first problem I see is, if you've ever done drugs or too much alcohol, the brain is not ready to meditate. It may be never be ready.

Usually, when I have somebody coming to me, and I hear what their problems are in meditation, and I find out that they've done drugs, even just marijuana, they probably shouldn't meditate. There are other ways in the Christian tradition to come to that very same place, not through the door of meditation practice, because we believe in just this one lifetime.

There are other practices, meditation may be too powerful for some people. You don't need to meditate. There are other ways. And I can share with you what those other ways are, but I'm going to stay with meditation this morning. So drugs are an impediment to meditation.

**\_\_\_There are some people who still do drugs and meditate.\_\_\_**

There are some people who still do drugs and meditate, but to be honest, they don't meditate very deeply. That's just how they cope. They either use a consciousness meditation with music, or they do visualization, but they don't go down to this very deep place of emptiness.

Number two, about women, I'm trusting that we are all friends here, abortion. Any woman who has had an abortion, will find it very difficult to go to a deep level in their meditation practice. You might say, "Well, aren't they the ones that need it the most?" Well, again, I'd say there are other ways.

An abortion is a very serious breach of life. Now, you can come to peace after an abortion, with reconciliation and love. A counselor that I worked with, and a psychiatrist I worked with, and my own practice of listening to women, lead me to believe that three out of five Catholic women have had abortions. High. Higher than you might think. It's just part of our culture, and it's okay. It's okay.

Well, let's deal with it. Let's be up front with it, and let's just pick up where we really are. There are ways through the abortion experience that you can come to this experience of unity with God and feel fine. I've recommended the Rachel program. I recommend the true confession of sin, and then moving on. It's not an obstruction to your spiritual life; it's a way through. I recommend reading the book, Harlots of the Desert.

You know, when you get to the desert fathers and mothers, the 200 women and men, who did they go to, to lay out their thoughts?

Yes, Ruth?

**RC:** Women.

**SR. MEG:** Yes, the harlots, they had great humility. There is a marvelous book translated by Benedicta Ward, "The Harlots of the Desert." I'd give that to every woman who has had

an abortion experience.

**LH:** Meg, if somebody has gone through the abortion process, maybe the programs that you've talked about, and maybe they have gone through the process of healing, could they then perhaps be involved in meditation, or do you think it's a closed door?

**SR. MEG:** Well, I'll just say my experience is that they'll go back to meditation, but I've never seen them do the type of meditation that is closer to the Buddhist type of meditation, in either the concentration or the receptivity. I think it's healthier for them not to meditate.

They might do the relationship practice of relating to a mate and being open then to a healthy sexuality, or even a celibate practice, they have a lot they can do, without meditating.

There is no sense of opening too deeply to the emptiness that brings back the terrible depth of pain that they've had through the abortion. Now, I would never say it directly, but usually they are not called to meditate. That's more the point.

Okay. The next level is mental illness. People that have had serious mental breakdowns or are taking medication because of schizophrenia or bipolar or multiple personalities. They always seem to end up on retreats because they are in a lot of pain, and they seek the benefit of the interior world. They can be very wise, and usually extremely intelligent.

Should they meditate? The answer is no. Really, no. There are other ways, again, through mindfulness above the river, staying faithful to their medication, being at one with the pain and sorrow they've had.

**\_\_\_The risk of meditation practice is too high for them.\_\_\_**

So mental illness is -- and they also -- we've had suicides. The risk of meditation practice is too high for them. Your risk as a teacher or a spiritual director is too high.

It's very hard with the mentally healthy to go this deeply under the river stuff, let alone people that are mentally unhealthy. We don't know what other forces might be working inside of them.

Okay, moving right along, the next group is the psychic phenomena folks. Some people are very open. They receive psychic phenomena. They are just paraspiritual.

I directed a retreat not too long ago with five or six Santa Domingo women as part of the group. They had a strong sense of the dead, the unliving. These cultures have much more of that kind of thing than we do in United States. They needed a very strong mental state to enter into the zones where that phenomena lives, they need a lot more training. That's another interesting level.

The fifth group are the people that overdo everything, they might access kundalini energy

quickly -- lights, bells, whistles, and sexual energies rising. They need to disqualify themselves, because it needs to be a slow practice, so that your whole inner level of energies can accept it when kundalini rises.

Kundalini is an energy that once it opens, can never be put to sleep again, it's very serious. None of the people I know are advanced enough to guide people once the kundalini opens. It can be pretty scary stuff.

The sixth area is false teachers. False teachers are people who at some level take the disciple, and become the need, rather than servicing the need. It usually shows up as sex, I have story after story about this.

Whenever there is touching, physical touching with a disciple or a student, it is always a bad sign. Not sometimes. Always.

There are these advanced spiritual folks that run around hugging people. The point is, they can give you these energies, yes, but it really would be better for somebody else to do it. You really should get your physical contact from friends, a mate, or a partner. Not through a spiritual teacher. We don't have enough walls to defend ourselves from that.

That leads me to the next domain, and then we'll have to get -- oh, gosh, it's time for Mass already.

We have to be very cautious in the spiritual domain of Reiki energy massage, all that touching manipulates spiritual energies, but what you might get is the practitioners spiritual energy.

The problem is as I see it , and Reiki does work, and it can heal. But the Reiki practitioners may mix whatever they have, any afflictive emotional programs that they have, with your energy. Just saying a little mantra isn't strong enough to purify everything. You really have to have a pure life.

The problem isn't the Reiki practice. The problem is who's doing the practice, and in my opinion most are not far enough along, to be doing what they're doing. For instance, they should be able to fast for 30 days before they do any Reiki body work on you.

To become a Reiki practitioner, it may only take two or three weekends to become certified, they look at it as, it's what they do, not who they are. It's the energies of the unseen you have to be really careful of.

You might come back a week or two later, and you've got all these phantoms living in your head. Stuff you've never had before, and what happened is, they just moved from the Reiki practitioner to you.

I'm moving to the last thing. We go down below the river to the dark forces, and there are a lot of them, the dark forces. They are demonic and they do have form, they do have force.

First you get the gifts, the forces of light. If they can't get to you through food, sex, things, and anger, they'll get you through pride or the angels of light. They have powers.

It's possible to see into people's hearts. You can see ahead in time or behind in time; the gifts of light, they are not that hard to get. They come sometimes through angels of light, which means they are really dark forces getting at you, through light forces.

\_\_\_You have to be very careful of people that have powers.\_\_\_

It's the pride. You have to be very careful of people that have powers, anybody that has powers. What you want in a teacher is humility, not powers, because those powers, where do they come from?

Then there are the dark powers. People talk about dark nights of the soul. All right, a dark night of the soul is someone not going through just normal afflictions of food, sex, anger, you know, death and all that. That's normal, they are afflictions.

A dark night of the soul is when you've experienced light, and then the darkness follows. It's all about God. God is missing. What happens in those dark nights is, light forces come and give you light, but they could be lights of evil, not lights of good. That is where you need direction, sorting out good lights from dark lights.

There are really dark forces. People really do hand themselves over to dark forces, and they end up needing an exorcism. As often as three times a year, I find somebody full of darkness, just full of darkness. I don't see halo's, usually, but you can just about see them. They are usually red, or they are gray and smoky.

I know people that can see spirits, they come in through doors and run around rooms and all of that. I'll ask them, well, what do they look like, and they always give me the same description. They are kind of smoky in the light. They have little red eyes, and they've got little -- like that picture on the wall, like that picture of Pan in Kusala's room.

**JO:** Yeats says it best: Where holy Dionysus once stood, a staring virgin stands. She took his heart from out his breast and held it in her hand. This is the transition from paganism to Christianity. Yeats said it best.

**SR. MEG:** Do you want to say it again?

**JO:** I'm paraphrasing, I'm sorry.

Once where holy Dionysus stood, a holy virgin stands, and took his heart from out his breast and held it in her hand.

It was a transition. St. Oren was a druid in Iona who worshiped the sun, and then Columba came and said, we worship the son behind the sun, and he was converted.

But we must always remember those moments of transition from where we first came, and how far we've come.

**SR. MEG:** And yet it's baptized, it's handed over to our hearts.

**JO:** Took his heart and held it in her hand. Yeats said it best.

**SR. MEG:** See, again, we are part of the cosmos, we believe that God through us is continuing creation, and we through God. Christ has already canceled out all evil, so we don't have to worry about that.

But meditation practice, especially if you go into too much emptiness, certain forces fill the emptiness. We don't have the strength, we don't have the teachers, and we don't have the teachings.

In my book "Tools Matter," the last chapter on discernment, I pulled together the teachings on the demonic from Cassian. You can find it there in John Cassian, who again Benedict presumed we knew, which we don't. So, in our tradition we have to be to be aware of, but not afraid of it.

That's the reason for holy water. That's the reason for the crucifix. That's the reason for the Jesus prayer, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner." So, we let God do it through us.

The emptiness of Buddhism, is Christ to the Christian, not no-self. There is nobody home.

If it's us, that's self effort, with a big scoop of ego self, and it could even be the fallen self, it could be evil. That's the biggest battle, good and evil. Meditation is a very serious way in which we are more vulnerable to those forces. It's good, but it also has the danger of evil.

That's why it was canceled out many times by the church, because often the demonic arose instead of the goodness. In our tradition, when you do have phenomena that rises, you must dash it on the foot of Christ, or get it verified by a wise director.

**\_\_\_Anything that rises in meditation, we let go of.\_\_\_**

So, here is the guideline: Anything that rises in meditation, we let go of. Anything! Good, evil, anything. We are just dwelling in front of our Lord; so, anything that rises, we lay aside.

Now, in our consciousness what rises, let's say to speak to our Lord, depending on what your path is. Above the river we can be more confident, yes, that is our Lord asking us to have a dialogue with him. But in our unconsciousness, under the river, usually nothing should be held on to. But sometimes we can't let go, because we are out of our domain.

If you are above the river, you know, through prayers and devotion and imaging, you can

use your mind there. But below, we need to let go of everything that rises. Those things may not be authentic.

**JO:** Jung would disagree with you. Our subconscious is full of everything, of course, but it's also an energy, our shadow side. The shadow is not necessarily bad; it's the unacknowledged side.

**SR. MEG:** Right, but don't you deal with it above the river instead of under the river?

**JO:** You can bring it up and deal with it in the light.

**SR. MEG:** I wouldn't bring it up. I would let it rise, and then deal with it.

**JO:** Then deal with it after it comes up.

**SR. MEG:** Jung is a good example of somebody who is not Christian. He is not Christian. He is self-effort. He is Hindu in his philosophy.

That is where we differ. We would let it rise, and then it's -- see, in other words, God isn't the center for Jung. The self is the center. It's functional transcendent, not transcendent functional. The transcendent is not at the center. That is where we would really differ.

That's why it's very dangerous for us to uncritically go to these places, which is what he did. He went to Hinduism to bring his marvelous stuff together, but it isn't the Christian tradition, and we really have to be careful.

I thought it was marvelous the way you got Kusala to talk about, "Isn't there somebody up there?" And he said, "No." And then you said, "Well, then who is doing this?" And he said, "Nobody."

We would say there is somebody, because we are a creature, and it's through Christ that we do this dynamic, because of Jesus being human. There is nothing like that in the Hindu or the Buddhist tradition. In the Asian tradition, they have no Christ who is also God.

Yesterday was the feast of Athanasius, and he combated the Arian heresy. The Arian heresy is basically the Hindu idea that we would all become gurus through many lifetimes, and that we are really god from the get-go.

Whereas, we don't think so. We say we are creatures from the get-go, and through Christ we become God. So, there is a basic fundamental difference there. It comes to the same point, but you could see our humility is different, and our training is different.

That's the way I understand it, anyway. Does it go down well?

Well It's time for Mass. But can see, if you have a teacher that is either a Hindu or Buddhist, you miss the Christian message. So, as Christians, we must continue this



dialogue to stay faithful to our path, but we can use some of the teachings we've learned from the East.

**JO:** We have the portrait of Jung with the message: God is there present whether called or not.

**SR. MEG:** Yes, we don't make God.

**JO:** He's present.

**SR. MEG:** He did believe in God. See, the Hindus believe in God.

**JO:** I am different from the self. The stumbling block is the self.

**SR. MEG:** You are marvelous.

Thank you all.

Day 5

Sister Meg | Rev. Kusala | Q & A