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[Bulletins](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Links](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Support MID](#)
[Benedict's Dharma](#)
[Gethsemani I](#)
[Gethsemani II](#)
[Gethsemani III](#)
[Abhishiktananda Society Bulletins](#)

[Help](#)

Introduction: Henepola Gunaratana

Henepole Gunaratana, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

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Page 2 of 2

Friends, our suffering is deeply rooted in our ignorance and attachment. Since suffering is the universal common denominator of all living beings, it is not possible for one individual or several individuals to eliminate it from the face of earth. But our understanding of the basic principle of suffering also brings us a way at least to minimize our suffering within a limited area. That means that, when I try to eliminate my suffering in that most positive way, I can influence my friends, relatives, and my circle of associates to a certain degree. That is what we call loving-friendliness or compassion.

When we do not have loving-friendliness or compassion, we easily alienate each other and don't have a common bond. If the suffering is universal, there has to be a universal cure. If I practice something to eliminate or minimize my suffering, by the same token I would be able to help others to reduce their suffering through the medium of loving-friendliness. Sometimes people use the word "loving-kindness" to describe what I am talking about. I use the word "loving-friendliness" because that is what it is. That is the translation of the word metta. Metta comes from the word, mitta. Mitta means "friend." Metta means "friendliness." When we feel friendly toward ourselves, we cannot feel unfriendly toward others.

We all know, according to the Golden Rule in Christianity, that we should do what we would like others to do to us. I would like to be happy and peaceful. I would like to minimize my suffering. If I love

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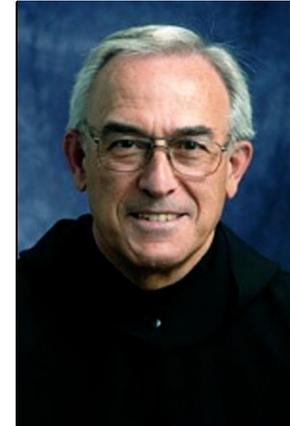
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myself, I don't do anything to hurt me. I do everything possible to minimize my suffering if I love myself. Similarly, I will do anything to help others minimize their suffering. First, therefore, I have to learn how to minimize my suffering, and then help others to minimize their suffering. Thus, we have three kinds of thoughts to cultivate within ourselves in order to minimize our suffering. First, we have to understand suffering thoroughly and our attachment to the nonexisting, superficial, imaginary concept of self. Then, through understanding the nonexistence of this self itself, we may begin to let go of the self. This is the number one thought we have to cultivate—the thought of letting go of this attachment to the self. This is what I sometimes call generosity.

Generosity does not mean sharing material things with others or our energies or skills with others. Sharing things with others is one aspect of generosity. Real generosity is called nikkhan. Nikkhan means letting go of the attachment to self and all sorts of external as well as internal things. Another word for such activity is selflessness—cultivating the thought of selflessness—what you might call renunciation, the letting go of things. Renunciation is a major feature in all religious traditions, but fundamentally the basic meaning of renunciation is renouncing our own attachment to our own nonexisting concept of self. The self is a concept, and we are very much attached to that concept. Letting go of that concept from its root is the real meaning of true generosity or true renunciation. This is the first thing we have to cultivate.

The second thought we have to cultivate to transcend or transform our suffering is the thought of friendliness as opposed to hatred. When we have friendliness, even in a very limited area with a limited number of people, to that degree we can reduce or minimize a certain amount of suffering among that circle. This is called boundless practice. It transcends all religions, cultures, traditions, geographical boundaries, and all limitations. Everything is transcended when we cultivate this thought of loving-friendliness. Loving-friendliness is fundamental in all the high religions in the world. (By "high" religions I mean the religions that value and respect living beings.) This is the fundamental principle of all high religions: To love all living beings and respect them in a very basic way.



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The third thought we have to cultivate is the compassion that arises from the thought of loving-friendliness. The first thing we must do is to understand universal suffering and not only individual suffering. Suffering is a universal principle and common denominator of all existing things. Therefore, we have to treat all living beings with the thought of loving-friendliness and compassion in order to reduce suffering. Then we try to understand the root of suffering—greed and ignorance—and cultivate thoughts that can begin to transcend our suffering and make our life relatively comfortable and peaceful.

People sometimes ask: "What is the purpose of life? We are just thrust into the world, and we just live without purpose." All living beings have one purpose—to be peaceful and happy. Everything we do in our life we do to make us peaceful and happy. Nobody does anything to make life miserable or unhappy. Everything everybody deliberately or purposely does is done in order to make oneself happy. We cannot count the things we do from childhood on to make ourselves happy. Yet, are we happy? Not yet. We are still working on it! Why? Because no matter what we do to make ourselves happy, until we do the right thing, we never will. The right thing to do to make ourselves happy is to gain understanding and get rid of our ignorance. The right thing is to understand the root of suffering, which is greed. Once we understand this, then we can cultivate the thoughts of generosity, friendliness, and compassion. All of the papers in this conference have brought out some aspect of suffering. And in all of the papers at root are the principles of greed and ignorance. Friends, thank you very much for your patient attention, and I look forward to hearing other wonderful speeches delivered by my colleagues.

William Skudlarek: Thank you very much for your words to us this evening. We didn't think of a formal closing for tonight's session, but I thought that maybe what the Catholic monastics could do for the benefit of us all tonight is to sing the Marian Antiphon of the Easter season, Regina Coeli.

[Regina Coeli sung.]

Good night and thank you.

<< Previous Page

Continued in **Joseph Goldstein's Presentation
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