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Zenkei Blanche Hartman: Discussion Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Stephanie Kaza, Sr. Joan Kirby, RSCJ, Archbishop Felix Machado, Ven. Chuen Phangcham, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Lobsang Tenzin, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam

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

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Dialogue after Blanche Hartman's Presentation

Donald Grabner: I want to speak up for a moment on original sin. It's one of the most badly understood teachings in Christianity today, and what Blanche has said I think maybe helps some of us Christians to recognize the problem that we face here; that we need to insist upon the fact that original sin is not an actual sin. It's not a personal sin. The individual is not guilty of original sin. That original sin is a state of sin, a state of nature, of human nature. It's the way Christianity, interpreting the story of the Fall in Chapter 3 of Genesis, tries to explain the presence of evil. The first two chapters of Genesis tell us that human nature is very good. But the very fact that we experience evil within us makes it necessary to give an explanation; although, it's not an explanation that denies the mysterious. Those who feel the unworthiness that so often arises in those who are preoccupied with sin blame poor St. Augustine for a lot more than what he is really accused of having said. Original sin is a sin of nature, an existential reality that we are dealing with. There is that tendency in us, that temptation to evil. How we deal with that, and how we recognize it as present in us without losing our sense of worth and dignity, is one of the big problems I think every religion faces concerning the question of evil, especially moral evil.

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Joseph Wong: During the first session this afternoon, the discussion centered on one of the major terms—the idea of love, which is specifically a Christian term. I was glad that somebody on the Buddhist side mentioned some corresponding terms that they could feel more at home with—emptiness or unconditional friendship. I like the second term, because it stands midway between love and emptiness. Unconditional friendship can satisfy both sides.

In this second session, we probably need to look at a major point of dialogue. There is, for me, a major difference in the approach to suffering from the sense of alienation, especially unworthiness. Buddhists stress how to overcome the sense of unworthiness as a source of suffering, especially as Blanche pointed out, the Buddha-nature in everyone: We are the Buddha, we are perfect, so we should have a proper evaluation of ourselves. On the Christian side, the two presenters, especially Meg, presented Chapter Seven of the Rule. As a Benedictine, I also feel almost instinctively I was thinking about that chapter. Perhaps there is a major problem that we need to discuss, because Chapter Seven of the Rule of St. Benedict, if we read it, might give us the impression that it's encouraging us to have a low estimation of ourselves, an unworthy understanding of self. For example, it says it's not enough to say that we are the most unworthy member in the community; we should be convinced inside that we are unworthy. That conviction should also manifest itself in our words and gestures—while we are walking, for example. Then that same chapter, among the twelve degrees of humility, also encourages us to accept that when we are assigned to, say, a lowly job, we should be glad to accept even the lowliest, as well as unfair treatment from the superior and so on. I think we need to discuss this chapter. Certainly, it's the heart of the teachings of St. Benedict. If we do away with that chapter, I don't know how much of the Rule can still remain.

I think the formation person should be very careful in transmitting this teaching to new candidates, because in terms of psychological theory, if you try to break down the self in a young candidate before he even has built up a self, the effect would be devastating. I think there is wisdom on both sides, on the Buddhist side and in the Rule of St. Benedict. That's why I want to put this as a question to both sides, the Benedictine monastics and the Buddhists, to see where they realize the difference in approach, and how would they look at the difference of



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this approach to solve the problem of suffering coming from a sense of unworthiness.

Stephanie Kaza: Somebody may have a better answer to this question, but I'll muddy the waters with another dimension. One of my own personal experiences of feeling tremendously unworthy was sometime in the 1970s or 1980s. I was quite ill at the time, and the response that I received from one of my coworkers was: "Try to just be a really good animal right now. Go out and lie on the beach, be warm, get the right food" and so on. Ever since then, I've been trying to think about these concepts of original sin, of greed, hate, and delusion from an animal perspective. I have training in biology, and I think sometimes by bringing our human constructs to these human behaviors, we miss an enormous dimension of all that evolved even before humans were here. From an animal's perspective, it is actually a very real thing to be inadequate. If you don't get enough food or shelter or you can't run fast enough from a predator, there are serious consequences. It's a good thing to recognize your inadequacies so you will compensate in some other way. It's not a sin. It's not a bad thing to be inadequate. It's just part of living an animal existence. I stumble the most, whether it's coming from a Christian or a Buddhist perspective, when the good/bad dualistic mind lands heavily on unworthiness or alienation or inadequacy. It's the dualism of the good/bad that weights me down, not the actual inadequacy. That I can figure out sooner or later. Do I need food? Water? What do I need to be a good animal?

I'm throwing this new dimension into the conversation because it's given me a whole other way to understand unworthiness and a kind of suffering that relieves us of the burden of human constructs, like the kind of solecistic thinking one can get into in trying to solve these problems. In this new sense, humility is a kind of surrender to the animal existence that is at the heart of who we are. That's a beautiful and not a terrible thing. It is a gorgeous evolved capacity to understand subtlety and need, drive and community on a much bigger scale, filled by weather and soil and so on. That's the kind of reclamation work I've been doing and would like to offer up. I can't find a way to reconcile that with original sin. It just is too beautiful at root.

William Skudlarek: I would like to respond to one of the points you



Archbishop Felix

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

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Ven. Dr. Chuen

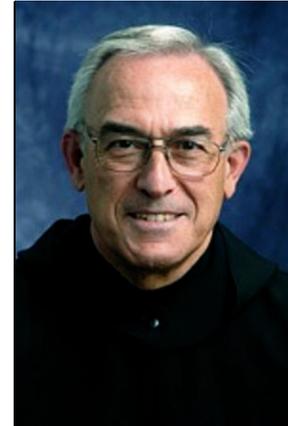
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made, Blanche, specifically about the important role that your teacher, Suzuki Roshi, had. I think I'm reflecting correctly what you said, but maybe not. Maybe I'm putting a spin on it that is more Christian. It was Suzuki Roshi's unconditional acceptance of everyone that relieved this sense of, "I'm not worthy, I'm no good, or whatever. I'm not up to it." That's certainly one thing that resonated very much with the kind of upbringing within the Christian tradition I've had, especially as it's been influenced by the Protestant reading of the scriptures. I also think it helped me get a different view of a Buddhist approach. Buddhism, as I've heard it or filtered it through my own way of hearing, basically asks that I do it all myself. It's my work. I have to arrive at understanding. I have to rid myself of these attachments. If I practice long enough and hard enough...and again it's the "I." I realize that that is already putting it into a very non-Buddhist way of speaking, but that's the way it comes through to me. Within a Christian tradition, there has been very great emphasis, especially after Martin Luther and other reformers, that ultimately I am helpless. I can do nothing to save myself. It's only because there is this infinite love that loves me unconditionally that I am freed and am free to be. Again, it's hard to speak it without using this "I" language, but that's the sense. I heard something of that coming through what you said; that it is in this bowing to one another day after day that freedom from a sense of unworthiness happens. It is by being unconditionally accepted by your teacher, who says to you, "You are good." It's by hearing those ordination words—that it is because we are the Buddha that we follow the Buddha's path that we are freed.

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Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, has been the Secretary General of DIMMID since November 1, 2008. Prior to that he served as chair of the MID board from 2000 to 2005, and as Executive Director of MID until his appointment as Secretary General. He is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, but resides at Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

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

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