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H. H. the Dalai Lama: Discussion Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

Ven. Ajahn Amaro, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Professor Ewert Cousins, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, H.H. Dalai Lama, Fr. Leo Lefebure, John Daido Looi, Ven. Chuen Phangcham, Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Sopa, Ven. Samu Sunim, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Geshe Lobsang Tenzin

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

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Thomas Keating: Just before leaving this point, it seems to me it's a rather significant issue in what distinguishes Buddhism and its wonderful perspective on the human condition and Christianity. This is that the idea of karma, which is such a brilliant insight, is a little different in Christianity. In Christianity, the idea that what you sow, you shall reap appears in scripture. But it is not the idea that Christ has taken away or suspended the law of karma. We say in the liturgy over and over again, "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world," meaning sin and all its consequences—primarily suffering. If Christ has taken away all the sin of the world, where is it? It's gone. That means that, at least from a Christian perspective, we have to make an exception of that idea of atoning for oneself through the infinite mercy of God, which suspends the law for those who put their trust in the divine human being that we believe Christ to be. We believe as Christians that we are incorporated in Christ through baptism. The crucifixion, which is a kind of symbol of the death of the individual self, the ego, mask, or whatever you might call it, is something that we also have to share, taking away the sins of the world. The atonement from

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Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai

the Christian perspective, then, needs a little more dialogue with the Buddhist perspective because both are an immense window on reality. There are no absolutes in this world except God or the Ultimate Reality. There is a lot of data in the Christian tradition in which certain individual persons have clearly suffered for a certain purpose or for a certain pocket of human suffering. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who seemed to go through a dark night in which she was asked to bear the kind of doubts about faith that the enlightenment of her day was experiencing, comes to mind. Therefore, atonement is a more complex problem than meets the eye. I think it meets some of the historical data of individual people or events or segments of people who have borne the sins of others.

To me, the [attack on the] Twin Towers [of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001] is a classic example of innocent people bearing the sins of the world. The towers represented the consumerist wealth-ideal of America. So the sins of the United States all descended on those poor people who were in the towers, who were just trying to earn a living or were concerned about their families. They were martyrs in a sense to the human family as a whole, martyrs in that they bore the karma or atoned for the sins of the American government, if you see it that way. Hence, they represent the mystery of the corporate crucifixion of the human family, or at least portions of it, that takes a whole portion of human evil on itself. And they do so without even intending to contribute to a balancing of spiritual ecology, where the enormous evils of society are balanced by the innocent suffering of people.

Joseph Goldstein: Something you said, Father Thomas, I think creates a bridge with the Buddhist understanding of a power taking away or purifying the sins. If we think of God as being the Ultimate Reality, Buddhists would correspond with the experience of the Ultimate, which we call Nirvana. In the Theravada tradition at least, one's first dip into Nirvana (and we could call it a baptism, since it is conceived of as entering the stream) actually has the power to cut off all of that karma that leads to realms of suffering. The immersion in the stream does uproot or take away all the effects of our unwholesome actions that could lead to what the Buddhist cosmology calls the lower

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Chodron**



Ewert Cousins, Professor Emeritus of Fordham University, died on May 30, 2009, in Bethlehem CT.

Dr. Cousins served for many years as an advisor to Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. He was the chief editorial consultant for the 100 volume Paulist Press series, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* and was also General Editor of the 25-volume series, *World Spiritualit...* [[Read full biography](#)]

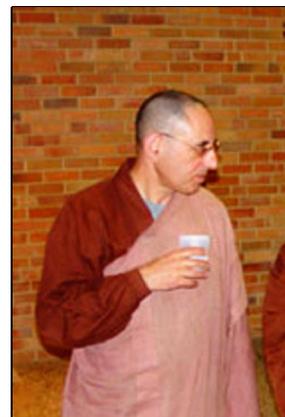
realms. I think the difference is that Buddhists see that karmic removal as a function of the power of the purity of the absolute without the intermediate level of personalizing it. If we look at it from the deepest level, however, I think there may be some correspondence.

Chuen Phangcham: His Holiness the Dalai Lama raised the point of how we can release egoism or selfish desire, which is one of the causes of suffering. Father Thomas Keating touched on the World Trade Center in New York, where nearly four thousand of our brothers and sisters were killed. Many of them, perhaps all, were working there for a good job not only their own families but for the world. Why did such a terrible thing happen to them? This is a question that you can help me understand in this dialogue.

In both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, we believe in karma. We cannot take the suffering from each individual. Even our own Brother Tenzin mentioned that each individual has to use their own effort to work out their suffering and salvation. Karmically, therefore, if someone is doing good, why would something bad happen to them? This is because karma is not only concerning this present life. It can be in the past life, too. Those people may have done something bad for themselves or others—and it may have been over many, many past lives. Karma continues even today—shaped by what has happened thousands of years ago.

William Skudlarek: I'm having a very strange experience here, because it strikes me that so central to the Buddhist understanding is nonduality: there is no other; there is no I. Yet I hear the Buddhists speaking about the necessity for each one to deal with one's own karma. There seems to be a bit of disagreement here, but the general agreement seems to be that no one can take away another person's karma. I, as a Christian, who live in this world of duality and trialities, believe that Jesus took away all my sins. I believe that I am in the body of Christ, and that we are one in Christ, and God is all in all. I believe that if any member of that body suffers, all suffer. If any member of that body rejoices, all rejoice. So, yes, I bear the responsibility for my own sin, but I also know and believe that I am part of that body of Christ in which those sins are being shared by all

[All articles by or about Professor Ewert Cousins](#)



Zoketsu Norman Fischer is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk,

and taken away by all; that every good deed that happens through me redounds to the good of all. So it's a kind of funny feeling that I have.

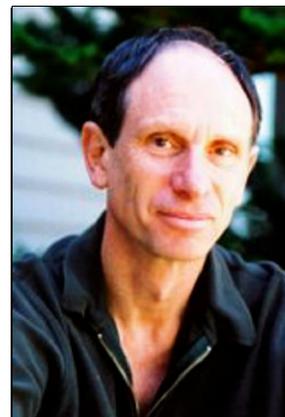
Norman Fischer: I had the same funny feeling, exactly what you are saying. I think it was very skillful of Father Thomas Keating to bring the issue up, because I think this is a point where there is a big difference. Despite all the bodhisattvic sentiments and compassion in Buddhism, we are all responsible for our own karma. We all have to practice. In Christianity, the fundamental idea is that the great love of Jesus has taken away our fundamental sin. I think, however, that these are two flavors of something else: practice, a life that one lives. Buddhists practice and Christians practice. At least in the monastic community, there is a sense of a daily life and something that one does about this faith. It is not enough to have this idea, unless it's realized through a life. The way I look at it, these notions are two very different flavors of a life lived in dedication to goodness and wholeness. That, we share.

This is why I think intermonastic dialogue really works. When we first conceived of this topic of suffering, our original plan was to go into Louisville and have a big public meeting, inviting youth especially to come, and to offer the fruits of our dialogue. My question is, How do we offer the practice, the life, with its different flavors to a world in which most of the people are not monastics, and don't have the benefit of the kind of life that we have set up institutionally? What can we offer from our way of practice to the world? The virtue of our dialogue is the more we dialogue, the more we come to some unity in practice, recognizing the real differences in flavor. Then we can actually find a way to offer it to a wider circle. There are advantages and disadvantages to both flavors.

Blanche Hartman I believe that His Holiness offered this teaching to us because it is exactly a practice that anyone can do anywhere anytime—taking on the suffering of others and giving out well-being and happiness. I'd like to tell you about a student of mine. She is a person who suffers a lot from anger and resentment. She has just been learning Tonglen, this sending and receiving. As she was crossing the street, she saw a woman struggling, because she had a deformity and was having difficulty crossing the street. She began then to practice

OSB, was the executive director of the MID board from 1989-2004. She was prioress at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana and is the author of a number of books, including *Thoughts Matter* and *Islam Is . . .*

All articles by or about Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB



Joseph Goldstein is the co-founder of Insight Meditation Society and The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts. He was involved in both Gethsemani Encounters.

All articles by or about Joseph Goldstein

Tonglen with this woman. Now, I have no idea what effect it had on the woman's suffering. But the effect on my student's suffering was dramatic, because, as she practiced, by the time she got across the street and got in her car, she experienced this flood of gratitude for her life, which she had never expressed to me before. This is why I think the Dalai Lama is suggesting a practice that we can do and offer to others.

Mary Margaret Funk: It seems like we are moving to another point here, so I want to ask Tom: Did we answer your question about atonement?

Thomas Ryan: Yes, it generated enormous response. To push a step further, then. In light of the discussion, would it be fair to say that the Buddha then would be savior only in the sense that he would show others the way and not in the sense that he is able to take upon himself their suffering and erase the negative effects of their karma? Have I understood that correctly?

Ajahn Amaro: I think it's necessary to distinguish between the Buddha as the external teacher and then Buddha-nature. When Father Thomas Keating speaks of washing away the sins, Buddhist terminology talks about ending karma. When a being is enlightened, then there is a complete realization of selflessness. The life of body carries on, and emotions arise and things are perceived, but there is no dukkha generated. The body might be in great physical pain, but there is no complaint or anguish about it. The heart is completely in accord. In a way, therefore, that enlightened mind, the presence of the Buddha-nature washes away sins. There is no sense of disorder. When that Buddha-nature is fully realized and operating, there is absolutely no suffering. Even though the body might be in pain, it's absolutely okay. The external Buddha as a teacher can't remove the results of sin and suffering; but when the Buddha within is truly awakened and realized, I would say that that has exactly the same effect of Christ.

Samu Sunim: In one of the scriptures, the Buddha says, I only point out the way. Whether people work the way or not is up to them.



Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.) is president of the Bhavana Society and abbot of its monastery in West Virginia.

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Zenkei Blanche Hartman is the abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

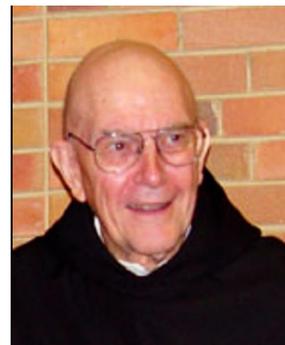
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John Daido Loori: I think it's an important question [Tom] that you are asking. One of the things that's happening in our dialogues is that we are getting lopsided in terms of the absolute. There is another half. The Prajnaparamita Sutra speaks of the absolute and relative, and their merging. So, no-eye, -ear, -nose, -tongue, -body, -mind is the absolute basis, but no-eye, -ear, -nose, -body, and -mind don't function in the world. That's the nondual part. You and I are the same thing, but I'm not you, and you are not me. Both of those facts exist simultaneously, at least from the Mahayana perspective. Let me clarify that. Master Dogen teaches in all dharmas a Buddha Dharma: There is life, there is death, there is practice, there is enlightenment, there is illusion. There are Buddhas and there are creatures, ordinary beings. When the ten thousand things return to the self, there are no Buddhas, no creatures, no enlightenment, no delusion, no life, and no death. However, he says, the Buddha way is beyond being and nonbeing. It falls into neither existence nor nonexistence. Therefore, there are Buddhas, creatures, enlightenment, delusion, life, and death. Therefore, from one perspective we speak of the absolute, which is where your question is coming from. When all beings suffer, I suffer. It's my suffering. There is no distinction between me and them.

Norman Fischer: And when you are liberated, all beings are liberated.

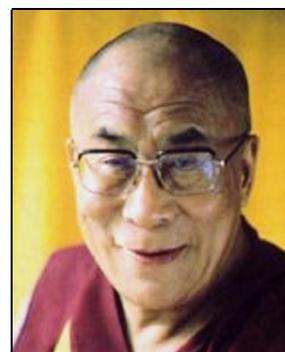
John Daido Loori: The same thing the Buddha said upon his own liberation. But then everything manifests in the world. That is why we have precepts. That is why we have moral and ethical teachings—how to behave, how to interact, and so on. These are based on the realization of the absolute, but designed to function in the world of differences. All these practices that we do are specifically designed to deal with the dualities that exist.

Leo Lefebure: I'd like to approach this discussion from a Christian perspective. Obviously there are many differences in the background, but I'd like to push what has been discussed, probably picking up on some things William Skudlarek said. In the Christian world, on the one hand we have the sense of God as totally other than this world, as the creator, the giver of the act of existence. There is a whole strand of the Christian tradition, however, represented by people like Bonaventure,



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His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is the head of state and spiritual leader

Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa in the Middle Ages, who stress that all of us exist in the mind of God; and in the mind of God, there are no distinctions. From one perspective, that is the most real existence of me—as God knows me. That knowledge is truer than my own imperfect knowledge of myself. In a real sense we are all one, and yet there is also the reality of creation itself.

Bernard de Clairvaux, one of the great leaders of the Cistercian tradition, was asked by a monk: "Since everything in Christianity depends on grace, why do we have to do the whole monastic practice?" I think it's similar to Dogen's question: "If the mind is originally enlightened, if we are Buddha-nature, why do we do the whole monastic routine?" Bernard de Clairvaux told him: "You can't think of this as we do fifty percent and then God does fifty percent. God does a hundred percent, and we do a hundred percent." As long as we are thinking of God as another finite agent, we are not thinking of the God in whom Christians believe. So I think the whole language game—certainly among Christians, and as I understand it with Buddhists—has to be understood from different perspectives, where different statements that seem contradictory can be true. Nicholas of Cusa, coming out of the same tradition, argued very strongly that God is not other. He even argues in Latin, *Non aliud est non aliud quam non aliud*. "Not other is not other than not other." What he meant by that is that, on the one hand, God is infinite, and there is no proportionate between the finite and infinite, so I can never understand God at all. On the other hand, if God is simply out there, God is a finite being other than the world. So God must be not other than this moment right here.

Samu Sunim: Can I go back briefly to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's text? The way I see the text, I think His Holiness the Dalai Lama was trying to strike a balance between reconciliation with the past on the one hand and creating a new hope or new future on the other. He used the word "endurance." Reconciliation with our past, whether it be individual or collective, which is an important practice in Buddhism, is usually described by ethnic Buddhists these days as endurance, which implies purification and prevention. The unwholesome things that we have done in the past are the causes of what we are living right now.

of the Tibetan people. He has been involved in interreligious dialogue through the Gethsemani Encounters and visits to India and the United States for many years.

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John Daido Looi is the founder and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York.

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So we must endure. We have to be accountable and responsible. That takes the form of endurance and purification.

At the same time, however, we have to make sure that this does not happen again in different forms—such as in retaliatory actions, which perpetuate the unwholesome action in many different forms. So we must prevent this and create a new, nonviolent environment for our future. I think that is what the Dalai Lama is trying to convey. I think he is implying a balanced practice between wisdom and compassion—wisdom and compassion being the two wings of Buddhist practice. Compassion without being supported by wisdom can be blind. Wisdom without compassion can be cold and dry.

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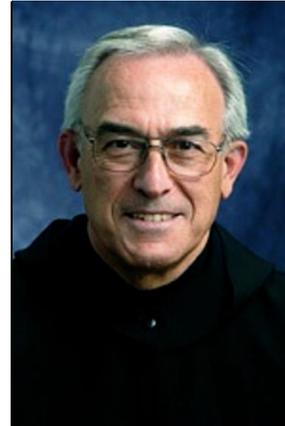
Ven. Dr. Chuen Phangcham is the director of the Wat Dhammaram/Vipassana Meditation Center, the Thai Buddhist Temple in Chicago.

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Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Fr. Thomas Ryan resides at the North American Paulist Center in Washington DC, and works for Christian unity and interfaith relations through a variety of formats: interreligious dialogue, retreats, on-line courses, graduate instruction, workshops, etc. He has served on MID's Board of Advisors.

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