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Norman Fischer's Reflection

Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

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

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William Skudlarek: I'm not going to give a long introduction to either Norman Fischer or Leo Lefebure, who will be the two presenters giving their reflections on what has been going on here and what we hope will continue. I would only like to call attention to the fact that on the program, it was Brother David Steindl-Rast who was going to do that. He was not able to be with us, but this has provided us Catholics with a wonderful opportunity to have our own pinch hitter in the person of Leo Lefebure.

Norman Fischer: Sylvia Boorstein, a friend of mine whom many others in the room know and is a great Buddhist teacher, has a saying about talk. She says that there are only four possible things that one person can say to another. Those four things are: "Hello," "I love you," "thank you," and "goodbye." What I've heard these last few days is that we've been saying to each other the first three. We took about a day or so to say, "Hello." Then after a while we started saying, "I love you." Then we started saying, "Thank you." And now it's time to begin to say, "Goodbye." I took a lot of notes from our conversations these last days. As I was looking over my notes last night I was thinking about what I would say this morning. There are so many wonderful things in my notes that I wrote down, sayings of ancient masters from both of our great traditions. There are also beautiful sayings of contemporary masters, those of us in the room. It's going to take me some time to type these things up and think about them and savor them. There is no doubt that I will repeat them to friends and make use of them.

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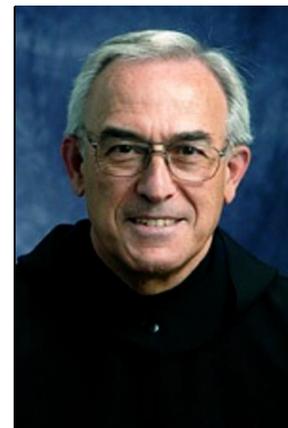
Zoketsu Norman Fischer is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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We heard some great stories. Who's ever going to forget about Daido's mother on her last day, praying with Daido in Italian and her beginning to repeat the words and fall asleep? Who's ever going to forget the story of the tough Brother Phillip at New Camaldoli as Joseph told it so beautifully? Who will ever forget Meg's adventures in Bolivia? It's an unbelievable story. And who is ever going to forget Bhante G. sliding down the shoot in Hawaii? I don't think any of us will forget these stories, stories that you can't separate from the faces and the voices of the people who told them, and that you can't separate from the feeling of this room and of all of us people in it, of the sky and these beautiful hills, of the church here at Gethsemani. We've had a beautiful time, which is really strange when you consider that we came here for the purpose of talking about suffering. We came to talk about suffering; and it seems as if in trying to speak about suffering, instead of suffering we found love and community.

In the beginning of all of our sessions, just like today, we heard music. But to my ear, it was music all day long, not just in the so-called musical interludes at the beginning. At one point in one of our sessions Joseph Goldstein said that sometime in the course of his practice when he was really confused, holding in his mind many contradictory teachings, he had a realization that no teachings are truth; that they are all skillful means, all expressions that point to the heart so the heart can fall open. I've been really impressed by the passion in everyone who has spoken these days. We all have a passion for our traditions. You would expect this from Christians. But it is impressive to me how passionate we Buddhists are about the Dharma. It's all music. All our words are music. I don't think any statement that anyone has said stands alone as truth. All our statements and expressions these days stand in relation to all the other statements and expressions that surround them.

There has been a lot of truth, a lot of insight. Yet I think what we've really been doing is playing music together—the music of, "Hello. I love you. Thank you." So what I am going to take home from our meetings is this feeling of beautiful friendship; that by our living together, talking together, praying together, singing together, eating together, being silent together, and listening together, we become friends. Our hearts



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connect. It's wonderful that our own various communities, the United States airline industry, its highway system, and the Gethsemani community have all supported us to come together to hang out with our friends. It's actually a kind of scandal that all of us took four days off from our busy lives and work and came all this distance at great expense to hang out with friends and not do much of anything else. I think our high-level, internationally effective, interreligious meeting comes down to that in the end: Just being friends, just hanging out together.

Our topic has been suffering, and we really have talked about suffering—the suffering that we've known as individuals, that we've seen in other individuals, of the institutions that we're part of, suffering caused by the institutions that we're part of, and suffering in the world at large. When we chose this topic for our conference, we had the idea somehow that maybe our conversing about these things would help somehow. But we didn't solve a single problem. We just lit the candle of friendship. At the same time, though, friendship has a tremendous power to it. In fact, it's possible that there is no force in this world more powerful than the force of friendship. We've been pretty honest these days, and all of us have talked about our own inadequacies and the inadequacies of our institutions. But I've heard in a much stronger and louder way the sheer goodness of all the people assembled here. I really cannot speak about myself with any confidence, but I am sure about all of you—that you are really good people; sincere, wise, and kind people. It's such an unusual thing to have an assembly of people like that. It doesn't happen often.

When sincere and wise and kind people become friends, and know one another and support one another well, then powerful and amazing things can come from that. I believe that we have a lot of power together to make changes in the world. It's a huge responsibility, and I wonder what we'll do with that. Our communities are strong repositories of sanity, peace, love, and wisdom, and the world needs these things more than ever. So it's our responsibility to see what we can do to share our inner wealth. I know that we are all of us already doing this, but I think we have an obligation to do it more. I'm feeling from our discussions that maybe the mystery of Jesus' death,

resurrection, and ascension, and the power and meaning of Buddha's enlightenment—happenings that are not merely historical events and the personal accomplishments of anyone—really amount to healing ourselves and the world with a spirit of openness and wonder.

The religious life is always the life of contemplation and real practice. We have that in our communities. How are we going to let the world know that we are here and that we are willing to offer what we have to the world? I think our friendship, if we follow up on it with courage and act on it, will provide the answer. Over the years of the Gethsemani Encounters, what I've learned and come to appreciate the most (which was real news to me) was the strength and beauty of the Christian community and of the Christian message. My knowing all of you Christian brothers and sisters has made a difference in my life, and I have seen through you why Jesus really matters so much. I feel as if your community is an untapped resource for healing the world, as are our Buddhist communities.

In the end, this is the point of our dialogue and of our friendship. It will show us the way to offer our practice to the world because that's our unique offering. Somehow by joining together, we'll find a way to do it. What will we do, actually? Will we have that first ever bhikkshuni ordination ceremony in the West that I mentioned the other day, attended by Buddhists of all traditions as well as a powerful representation by Catholic men and women religious, who will join us on that occasion to celebrate the fact that ancient lumbering religious institutions can and do change when there is courage and energy and the need for change? Will we establish temporary and maybe even permanent monastic foundations where Buddhists and Christians, maybe even men and women, practice side by side? Will there be Christian convents that have a wing for Buddhist women in them? Will some of us go on the road or in public places, offering teachings together to show the world that it is possible through friendship to hold difference as difference and yet transcend it so we can work together in peace for peace? What other ways will we find to cooperate and release the tremendous wealth of energy for the good that lies within our communities and even within the world?

Before I attended the first Gethsemani Encounter, I thought of religious dialogue as a polite and harmless thing, which would be mildly amusing if you had the time for it. Now I think of interreligious dialogue as something really subversive and transformative. It can't be possible, can it, that greed and confusion are destined to be so entirely in charge of the world as they are now? It's probably true that they'll never go away. But do they really have to be so much in charge? Buddha said, "No, they don't." Jesus said, "No, they don't." Our dialogue has barely begun, and I don't think any of us know where it will take us. But I hope that we and those who come after us will have the courage—because it will take courage—to find out. This is why I think we should continue to say, "Hello. I love you. Thank you." But maybe we should hold off on saying "Goodbye" until we actually get our work underway.

I'm finished with my own remarks, but I have a short poem. This is a poem by the Estonian poet, Jaan Kaplinski. It's called, "We Are Always Growing."

We are growing, we are always growing.
Sometimes back into ourselves.
As a bow turns back to the trunk.
Sometimes away from the trunk, from ourselves
Into other people, places, languages.
And sometimes we lose our weight.
Our growing becomes more like free fall.

It is as if what we thought was a leaf or a twig
Suddenly flies away as a chickadee or a finch.
The bow trembles an instant, then stands still.

So, thank you all for our days together and for giving me this chance to speak with you.

Continued in **Fr. Leo LeFebure's Reflection (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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