

# GETHSEMANI:

## the conversation continues



Photo Jim Funk

"I think that we have now reached a stage of ... religious maturity (where) it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian and Western monastic commitment and yet learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline or experience."

-Thomas Merton

(*The Asian Journal*)

**G**ethsemani Abbey, in Trappist, Kentucky, the home of famed Cistercian contemplative, Thomas Merton, was first chosen as the site of an inter-monastic dialogue in July 1996. Almost fifty Buddhist and Christian monks and nuns, and lay people, gathered at that time to practice and dialogue about the spiritual life. His Holiness the Dalai Lama attended. At the 1993 interfaith dialogue session at the Parliament of World Religions, he had suggested that the dialogue continue in a monastic setting, where he could be "a monk among other monks." Hence Gethsemani.

After the Vatican (II) Council's innovative observation that truth is also to be found in non-Christian religions, the Confederation of Benedictine Abbots sponsored their first Asian East-West

Inter-monastic Conference in Thailand, 1968. The conference was attended by the late Thomas Merton, who, just before, had spent three days in Dharamsala with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The two men affected each other. Merton wrote of the Dalai Lama to his abbot: "He [is] very open and sincere, a very impressive person, deeply concerned about the contemplative life, and also very learned. I have seldom met anyone with whom I clicked so well, and I feel that we have become good friends." The Dalai Lama meanwhile credited Merton with opening his eyes to the truth that Tibetan Buddhism does not hold the world's only truth. At Gethsemani he told participants, "As a result of meeting with [Merton], my attitude toward Christianity was much changed." This dialogue, he continued, would fulfill Merton's wishes for both



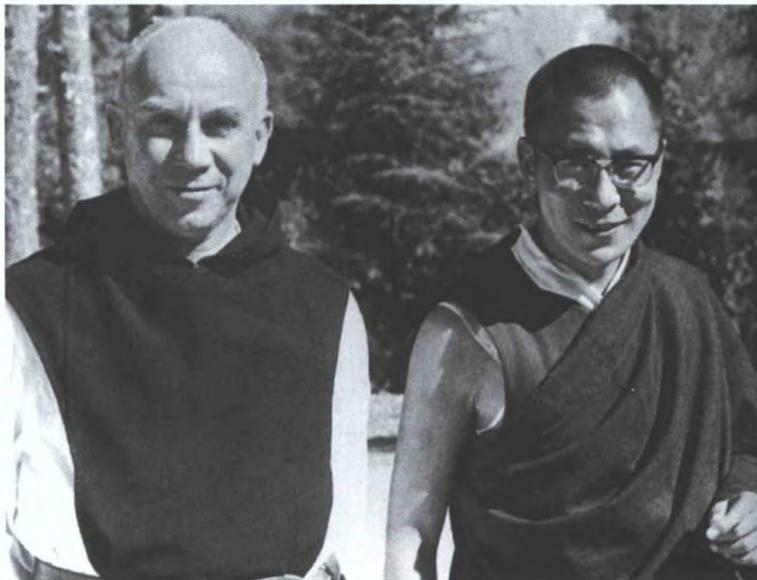
one with much “deep breathing-in of the thoughts and words of others, [and] much exhaling of what is alien and divisive.” Christians asked Buddhists about methods and practices of prayer, and Buddhists asked Christians about their long tradition of social action. Benedictine Sister Mary Margaret Funk said that while Christianity has a long tradition of meditation, it has been obscured by centuries of emphasis on social action, and that many Christians are looking to the East to relearn meditation. How does His Holiness reconcile the apparent conflict between prayer and social action, she asked. He recommended a “50-50” split between prayer and action. Buddhists are inclined to withdraw from the world, he said. “We have to learn from our Christian brothers and sisters [to] have more socially engaged activities.”

Said Franciscan priest Murray Bodo, “Being here, listening, observing and receiving the *loving kindness* of my Buddhist brothers and sisters has enriched me. It has made me want to learn more about how they pray, what prayer does in their lives. It makes me want to share with them what Christ has done in my life, how he has taught me to pray, what Christian contemplation and meditation have done for me.”

Over six days in April 2002, twenty Buddhists (Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan) and thirty-five Catholics (mostly Benedictine and Trappist), gathered at Gethsemani to continue the conversation. This time without the Dalai Lama, who was unwell.

scholarly sharing and praying together among monks of different traditions.

According to Benedictine prior Father Pierre de Bethune, the dialogue at Gethsemani was



*Thomas Merton with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Dharamsala, India, 1968 – the historic meeting of two influential monks. Merton died accidentally later that year.*

Participants engaged in a full schedule of activities, which began early with morning meditation, and continued with two sessions in the morning, a Buddhist ritual, two afternoon sessions, and a Christian ritual. “Suffering and its Transformation” was the dialogue topic.

“Suffering caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation” was the theme of the first day. Here one’s personal suffering, and how to overcome it, was emphasized. “As we were just getting to know each other,” attendee Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron observed, “the discussion remained somewhat intellectual, although some of the presenters told personal stories.”

“Suffering caused by Greed and Consumerism” occupied the second day. The challenges facing society as a whole as well as individuals was discussed. On the third day, in “Suffering caused by Structural Violence,” participants explained how their own religious institutions caused suffering, as well as how societal structures and laws perpetuated misery and injustice, Chodron said. “We talked about pedophilia and its institutional cover-up in the Catholic Church; and “clericalism,” the perpetuation of the values and power of the male elite in both of our religions.” Both women and men spoke openly, without animosity or defensiveness, she added.

“Interestingly,” Chodron observed, “[on the fourth day’s topic], ‘Suffering caused by Sickness and Ageing,’ we spoke of how to help others who were dying and then our different theological views of life after death. One participant pointed out that we had avoided speaking personally about sickness and ageing even though one presenter had led us through such a meditation. At this point, participants opened up and told moving stories from their lives about how their religious

practice had helped them to deal with illness and accidents and how those events propelled them to deeper practice.”

The formal sessions were only one aspect of the conference, said Chodron. “So much valuable interchange occurred in personal discussions during the break times.” The Buddhist contingent, Asians and Westerners, got together over two evenings to introduce themselves to each other. “[The introductions ] were fascinating and very helpful,” Chodron recalls. “Us ‘young ones’ (I’ve been ordained 25 years) rejoiced at our elders’ practice. Geshe Sopa had been a monk over 60 years and Bhante Gunaratna over 54!”

On the last day two participants gave summaries and dialogued about their impressions before the conversation was opened to all participants. The goodwill was palpable, Chodron said.

Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron is “still digesting the experience,” but found the following points prominent: “First, I was struck by the fact,” she began, “that the Christians continually cited and talked about Jesus’ life whenever they spoke of Christian doctrine. While the Buddha’s life is an example of how the Dharma is to be practiced, we usually discuss the teachings without referring to his life or extensively analyzing what different episodes meant.

“Second, I was jolted when Fr. Thomas Keating said that young monastics entering Christian monasteries do rituals, service work, and so forth, but aren’t taught a practice, a method of meditation, for working with their minds. As he was [speaking] a young Benedictine monk nodded his head vigorously. This was corroborated by a nun who told of a near-death experience she had, [and had come] out of it knowing that she had to find a prac-

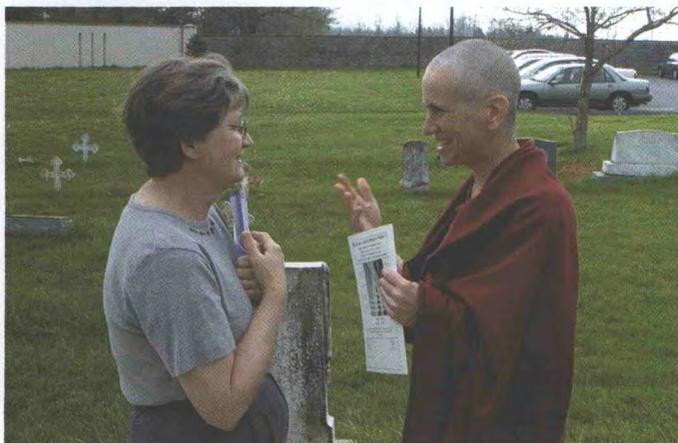
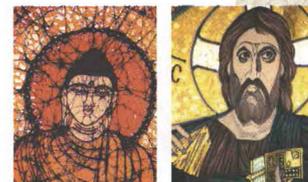
tice to do. She now does centering prayer, a Christian practice taught by Fr. Thomas Keating.

“Third, I could feel the faith and the good intentions of the Catholic monastics there. I could also feel the weight of the history of the Catholic Church, the wars it has perpetrated, the cultures in which it has been an imperialistic power, the injustices towards which it has turned a blind eye. I wondered how my Catholic friends felt about that ... It took me a long time in my Buddhist practice to figure out that Dharma and Buddhist religious institutions were two separate things. The former is the unstained path to enlightenment, the latter are institutions created by us flawed sentient beings. I could have faith in the Dharma without having to get involved in the politics of Buddhist institutions or defend institutional errors ...

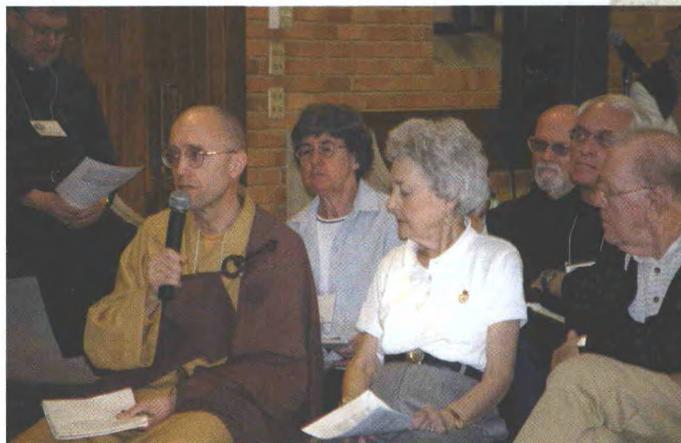
“Fourth, the Catholic and Buddhist nuns bonded very well. Two Catholic sisters suggested [that] we nuns get together over a weekend in a smaller gathering so that we could go into topics of mutual interest in more depth. That would be great!

“Fifth, it was unusual for me to be in a gathering where I was one of the youngest participants (I’m 51). The intellectual inquiry, patience, stability, and willingness to learn of those who had been ordained forty or fifty years inspired me.”

For further information see *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* edited by Donald W. Mitchell and James Wiseman (New York: Continuum, 1999). Doubleday Publishers have agreed to publish the volume on the second Gethsemani Encounter, due out in 2003.



Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron (right) with Sister Danielle Witt



Rev. Heng Sure at the microphone

Photos Jim Funk