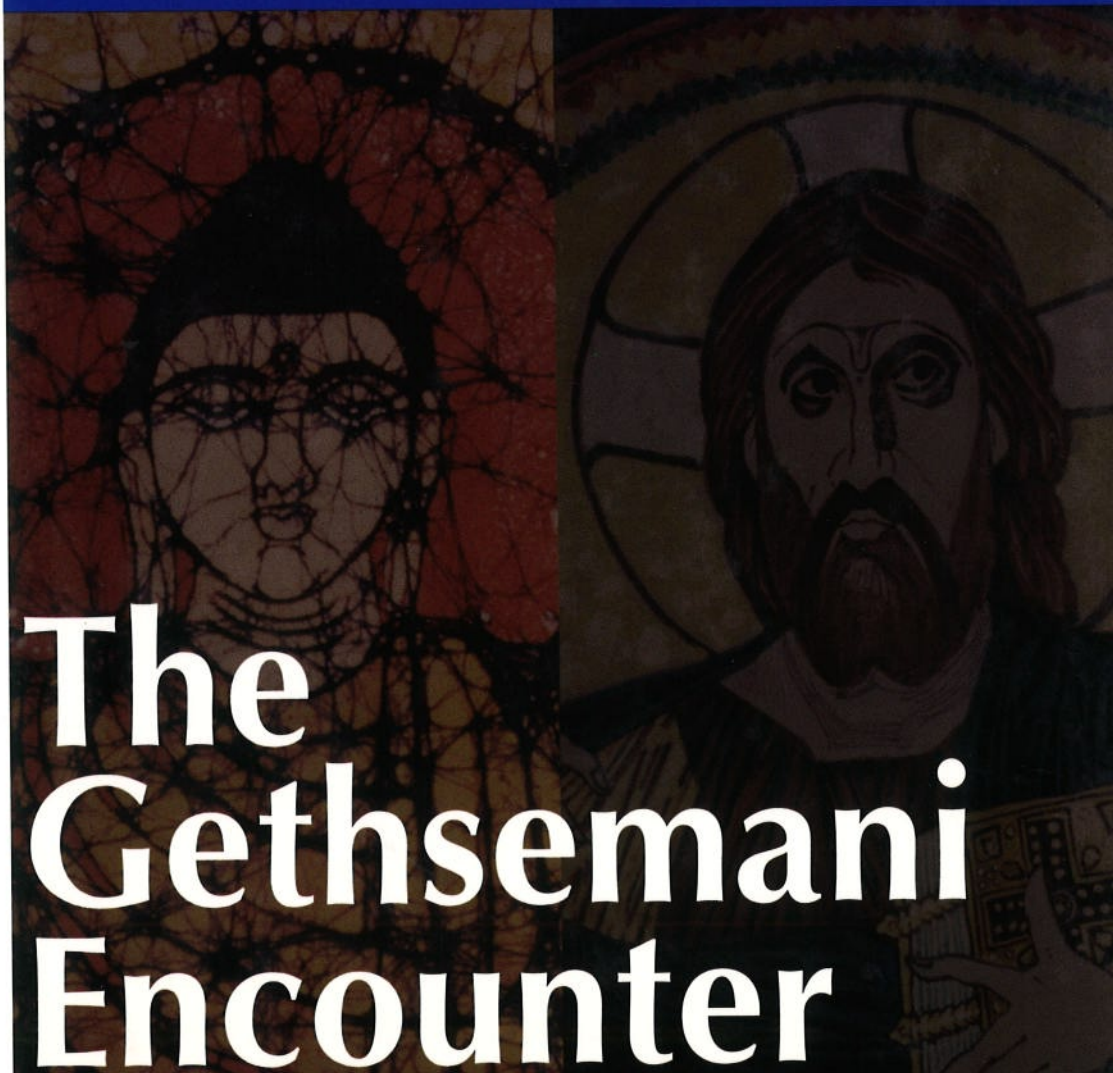
A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics



The Gethsemani Encounter

Edited by Donald W. Mitchell & James Wiseman, O.S.B.

CONTINUUM

Edited by Donald W. Mitchell & James Wiseman, O.S.B.

The Gethsemani Encounter

A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics

"Gatherings of spiritual practitioners from different backgrounds, such as the Gethsemani Encounter, are of immense value....I hope that Christians, Buddhists, people of all faiths and people without faith will approach this book from the Gethsemani Encounter with the same rigorous curiosity and courage for which Thomas Merton was renowned. It is my hope that readers of this book may find in it inspiration and understanding that in some way contribute to their own inner peace. And I pray that through that inner peace they too will become better human beings and help create a happier, more peaceful world."

– His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Continuum • New York

ISBN 0-8264-1046-4

9 780826 410467 90000>

THE GETHSEMANI ENCOUNTER

A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics

Edited by Donald W. Mitchell
and James A. Wiseman, O.S.B.

CONTINUUM NEW YORK

1997
The Continuum Publishing Company
370 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Gethsemani encounter : a dialogue on the spiritual life by Buddhist and Christian monastics / edited by Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-8264-1046-4
1. Christianity and other religions—Buddhism—Congresses. 2. Buddhism—Relations—Christianity—Congresses. 3. Spiritual life—Catholic Church—Congresses. 4. Spiritual life—Buddhism—Congresses. 5. Monastic and religious life—Congresses. 6. Monastic and Religious life (Buddhism)—Congresses. 7. Catholic Church—Doctrines—Congresses. 8. Buddhism—Doctrines—History. I. Mitchell, Donald W. (Donald William), 1943– . II. Wiseman, James A., O.S.B.
BR128.B8G48 1997
261.2'43—dc21 97-24414
CIP

Contents

at last, suddenly, you have a breakthrough. Suddenly, darkness disappears and there is awakening or enlightenment. So now, I know that through non-dual prayer of communion, by just praying in that way, something happens at the end of that process. Sr. GilChrist quotes Thomas Merton as saying "The gate of heaven is everywhere." In this case heaven does not mean where you go after you die, but as "everywhere" it means the Kingdom of God, or as for the Buddhist, a kind of Pure Land. In our tradition, the Pure Land is in our mind. The important thing is that the gate of heaven is everywhere so you can get in the gate everywhere.

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: By saying that heaven is everywhere, Thomas Merton also meant that the spiritual journey does not just consist in putting one foot in front of the other and making many, many steps. The spiritual journey also consists in opening your eyes and seeing that you are already there. This is not an either/or matter, but one can look at it from two different sides.

Love

SHARON SALZBERG: I have two questions. One is perhaps more theoretical and it has to do with our own lovableness, our lovability. This seems to be in contrast to what St. Augustine said about loving oneself as presenting the face of stupidity. There seems to be a very different meaning of love, or a very different meaning of oneself in that regard. One type of self-love is very limiting and egotistical, and the other is freeing. The practical aspect of that distinction has to do with how we relate to the defilements that arise in our minds. Jeffrey Hopkins alluded yesterday to the Buddhist teaching that the mind is naturally radiant and pure—it is naturally shining. Our problems are because of the visiting forces known as defilements. These defilements are simply visiting, they are adventitious, they are not inherent to our being.

I have seen however in my own practice and in my teaching that it is very difficult to recognize this fact and have faith or confidence in it. Therefore, one of the greatest tools we have is actually the practice of loving kindness toward ourselves. In the Theravada Buddhist tradition, when we begin loving-kindness practice we begin with ourselves, which often seems rather shocking in a spiritual pursuit. It seems as if this would be selfish or limiting in some way. But in fact, it is considered the beginning or first coming close to that sense of the natural radiance and purity of our minds. It also implies having a relationship to defilements such as anger so that these defilements are less identified with who we actually

tell of a deep, radical conversion such that they cannot return to where they were before. Another sign of this conversion is that they are out of themselves, they are in a new state of consciousness which is usually accompanied by a radical relational dimension with God and with others.

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: St. Augustine's conversion experience was connected with *lectio divina*. He was attuned to hearing a child from over the wall singing in some game, "Take and read! Take and read!" He took this as meaning himself, and he went to the table where there was an open Bible. He read the passage that is there, and that passage really hit his heart and led to his final step of conversion.

KEVIN HUNT: In a certain sense, our *lectio divina* is a form of "mind training," as you refer to it in Buddhism. We do not approach it as the Tibetans do, or perhaps as the Theravadin tradition does, that is from an analytic and philosophical approach. *Lectio divina* means you assume the mind of Christ. As a practical method, the only way that you can do this is by—sitting down and reading. I can remember when I first entered the monastery, my novice master said, "Just take some time." Back in those days Catholics were not well known for their understanding or reading of scripture, so this was a completely new thing to me. I had great problems because my mind would go all over the world. So he said, "Just return to it, just return to it, just return to it." So, gradually this transformation of mind began to take place.

This is truly mind training, but I do not think we Christians have ever thought of it in quite that way. The practical way of doing it that I suggest to people is to take one of the Gospels and just read it from beginning to end. And then when you finish, start again and reread it, and reread it, and reread it, until the particular aspects of the mind of Christ, of what you encounter in the scripture, become part of you. I would like to ask the Zen tradition, do you have something similar to mind training through reading?

ESHIN NISHIMURA: In our medieval Japanese tradition, we have the following poem that Zen people like:

Seeing with ears,
Listening too with eyes,
There is no doubt at all.
A drop of water falling down from the roof,
Returns to itself.

whole body becomes light. This is not like a mind-image we use in ordinary practice. Rather, when *samadhi* becomes mature, it becomes like the sun, very bright. At the last stage, we see bright light like a diamond. When we see that light in my meditation class, we direct that light at the top of the head and send loving-kindness thoughts to all directions. This is how it affects our daily life.

BLANCHE HARTMAN: I would like to hear from some of the Christian contemplatives about how you experience God. I think it is essential that God be understood as not separate from ourself, that God is the fundamental ground of our being. Anyhow, that is my understanding, but I would like to hear actually from the Christians. How is God related to your own being?

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: Not that this is the definitive answer but it is an interesting answer to your question in the context here. Thomas Merton made a brief statement which I have always considered one of the deepest theological insights in our century. He simply says, "God is not somebody else."

JAMES WISEMAN: Brother David quoted Thomas Merton as saying that "God is not somebody else." Our spiritual writers often speak of the highest stage of spiritual life as one of most intimate union with God. They often use such language as, "The eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see God." Or, "I have become one with the very divine light with which I see, and with which I am seen." At times, Christians who have written that way have gotten into some trouble and have even been criticized severely. I think that one always has to keep two ends of the pole in mind. There is a certain tension here, and you find it even in the Gospel. Jesus does indeed say that "The Father and I are one." But you also find in the Gospel Jesus saying that, "The Father is greater than I." Both statements are there, and they are both true. They both have to be kept together.

Now, one of the great spiritual writers in our tradition who indeed speaks very boldly of identity with God—the kind of identity that he would find with God through prayer—also says that, "When I speak about being one with God, I mean through love." That could be read very quickly and one might not make too much of it, but to me it is extremely important. To me, it has become all the more important as I have reflected on the experience of human love, and on what some of our best psychologists have said about the experience of human love. It is noted that often there is a deep experience of fusion of the lover with the beloved. And if you read love letters or love poems you will often find language reflecting that experience. This is also the language of our great mystics. It refers to something real,

Explicitly, they always said they did not want martyrdom, and every time there was a new danger—when some of the missionaries were killed—they reassessed the situation. Each time they had good reasons to believe that they were safe. But they knew they were themselves in some danger and they did not desire to be killed. They desired to live and they loved life. But for them, martyrdom in the Christian sense is a witness. Someone has to be a witness to the way he or she lives, and if as a consequence to being faithful to the Christian life martyrdom comes, then it is accepted—but it is not desired.

Christ saved us by his life, not by his death. But his death is part of his life. It was because he was faithful to being the witness to his Father to the end that he had to accept death as the consequence of this witness. But he did not accept it joyfully. The agony was a tremendous difficulty for a young man who was facing death at thirty-three years of age. Also, if you analyze the New Testament very closely, you see that Jesus puts an end to the practice of sacrifices. The Eucharist is not a sacrifice as in the Old Testament, when we killed lambs. That makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. Christ was not killed as a sacrifice, he was murdered. Because he accepted to be murdered, it is his *life*—including that consequence—that has replaced all the sacrifices. And so in our life, we are not pleasing God by making sacrifices; we are pleasing God by *living* according to his message as Jesus did. And this, *our life*, is the only "sacrifice" that God wants. So when we celebrate the Eucharist, we celebrate the fact that Christ—God incarnated as a human being—has given himself as "food." We are not killing him; we are celebrating his life and the gift of life that he gives us as food—as nourishment—for our life.

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: I would like to speak from my own experience as to what it means to me to receive the blood of Christ. I always say to myself that it is the lifeblood of the risen Christ. So, I am drinking something that pulsates through all humanity—not only through all Christians, or through all humans, but even through the animals and plants—the lifeblood of the cosmic Christ.

MARY MARGARET FUNK: It seemed to me from personally speaking to Fr. Christian from Algeria, that his staying there was both a fidelity to his commitment as a monk in the community, and also an expression of his deep trust in the best in the others. He believed in the others' goodness, maybe more than they did. So I think from a Buddhist point of view, it might help to see that he knew they were good, and so he stayed to make that statement with his life.

In the middle of the dirt floor sat a lone monk in meditation. That monk I now realize was you, Maha Ghosananda! My question for you is a Zen question: "What did you do there where there was nothing to do?"

MAHA GHOSANANDA: I was seeking peace in myself so I would have something to give the others.

JOHN BORELLI: In the refugee camps, despite the desolate situation, there is great hope among the people. In the Khmer people who return, you can see that they were nourished by the Buddhist monastic tradition that is alive in each of their camps. But when we look around at the world today—at the conflicts in Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, the Middle East—very often these conflicts are identified as religious conflicts. We know that sometimes the media are trying to simplify the conflict by reporting them in just religious terms. I think this distortion persists because religious leaders allow this to happen. So, the question is, how should we work within our own communities to disengage our own people and religious leadership from these violent conflicts?

MAHA GHOSANANDA: First, your religious leaders should work at making peaceful persons. A peaceful person makes a peaceful family; a peaceful family makes a peaceful community; a peaceful community makes a peaceful country; a peaceful country makes a peaceful world. Peace begins in yourself. If you are peaceful in your heart, you can always make people become peaceful. The Buddha was a great religious leader. First he found peace in his own heart. Then on the first day he converted only five people. Then he converted 25 more, then 60. Now Buddhism has spread to the whole world. We always start with zero. Before Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama met there was nothing. But because of these religious leaders, there is something here at Gethsemani today.

HAVANPOLA RATANASARA: I want to dispel any confusion about the violence in Sri Lanka. The media speak of Hindus against Buddhists. But this is not a religious conflict at all! The problem is really a political and economic one. Religiously, the Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Muslims are living together in a friendly manner.

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: In Ireland it is also not a conflict between Christians, but it is a political matter being masked by religion.

DIANA ECK: We heard yesterday a very moving story of the Trappist monks who were taken from their monastery in Algeria, whose throats

order to control the body. Last, we focus on vigilance. The Buddha's last words were to the effect that we must be vigilant. So with peace and love, with freedom from fearfulness about ourselves, and with vigilance, we take care in every step.

MARY MARGARET FUNK: Maha Ghosananda, I was wondering if you could tell us what *mantra* you teach to children?

MAHA GHOSANANDA: Just tell them: "Step by step."

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: I hear a beautiful silence in the room. It has been suggested that the Maha Ghosananda would show us how to walk, and lead us out to Thomas Merton's grave.

MAHA GHOSANANDA: Yes, walking is like breathing: breathing in, breathing out. Walking is like breathing: step by step, carefully, watching your step.

Social Action

SAMU SUNIM: There are smiling *bodhisattvas* and unsmiling *bodhisattvas*. Buddhism in the West is more used to smiling *bodhisattvas* who are happy and content. However, there are unsmiling *bodhisattvas* who are not happy and content. With the situation of Buddhism today, particularly in Asia, I sympathize with the unsmiling *bodhisattvas*. So, I would like to speak on behalf of them. Your Holiness, in 1959 you escaped from your country due to the Chinese military occupation of Tibet. Since then, many Tibetans have followed you and have found refuge overseas. Now we have almost ten-thousand Tibetan monks in exile. Since 1979, Your Holiness has traveled in the West giving talks. As a result, thousands of people in the West have discovered Buddhist teachings, and thousands of people have embraced Buddhism in their lives. This would have been impossible without the Chinese invasion of Tibet. It is my opinion that, in this regard, Your Holiness is following the example of the historical Buddha who left his country in order to become a Buddha and a religious teacher.

However, I am also aware that Your Holiness is the head of a Tibetan government in exile in India. You have been seeking a political settlement with China over Tibet, and you oppose any kind of violent struggle for achieving the independence of Tibet. While I appreciate your nonviolent position, there is in Asia a history of Chinese and Japanese imperialism, the legacy of which still survives today. Christians and Buddhists collaborated

argument, or you may need to take some kind of serious counteraction. Spiritual practice coming from deep down sustains or maintains the God-feeling, the love or respect for others, so that you can—according to circumstances—take countermeasures without destroying your peace of mind. This ability very much depends on your early-morning meditation.

JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN: The Buddha gave a great emphasis to Right Speech and, of course, truthfulness is a central piece of it. But the Buddha also taught that we should only say that which is true *and* which is useful. Sometimes something may be true, and it may not be the right time to say it; it may not be useful in that particular context. But I think it is important not to use this teaching as an excuse to hold back from saying the truth when it is difficult *and* useful.

Then with regard to compassion, I feel it is important not to make a hierarchy of compassionate activity. Each one of us—as we develop a more compassionate heart—will express it in our own ways due to a whole variety of conditions. For some, its expression may be very much engaged in social activity. For somebody else, it may be sitting in the cave. I do not think that one is a greater compassionate action than the other. I think we need to embrace the whole range of possibilities.

KEVIN HUNT: I do think that perhaps one part of the Christian tradition that we have failed to emphasize is that our engagement in social activity is very much based on the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and it flows from his own words. In the Gospels, Jesus talks about heaven and hell. To those invited to heaven, he says, "Come into my Kingdom, for when I was hungry, you fed me; when I was thirsty, you gave me to drink." These persons then ask him, "But Lord, when did we feed you when you were hungry? And when did we give you something to drink?" And Jesus answers, "When you did this to the least, you did it to me." So, for Christians, our social engagement is ultimately a self-giving, egoless path of engagement with Jesus Christ.

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: This quote from scripture is worth reading because you will find that those who did the right thing and fed the hungry and visited the prisoners and so forth, did *not* know they were doing it to Christ. This is a parable which goes very much against those who *claim* to be Christian and do not do these things.

JINWOL SUNIM: Just a quick question. What do you mean by heaven and hell?

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: For the information of our Buddhist sisters and brothers, we have one of our earliest texts in the New Testament that says that women should not open their mouths in the assembly. So, it is encouraging to see that we are both dealing with similar problems in our traditions. Also, I might point out that in Taiwan and other countries in which there are now so many Buddhist nuns, there is also an increase in the number of Catholic nuns.

Unity

JINWOL SUNIM: I want to know what you mean by "Kingdom of God." Many different religions use the term "God." So, do you mean that there is only one Kingdom of God for just Christians? Or do each people have their own Kingdom of God? Could you clarify this notion?

EWERT COUSINS: I think we are all in it together. In other words, geography cannot keep us apart any longer. That is obvious. I mean even if we tried it would not work, and I do not think we are going to try, or going to be *able* to try. What was once a geographical and historical separation for humankind has collapsed in our time. So, the new world we are all working for—what we Christians call the Kingdom of God—is something that embraces the whole human community.

HAVANPOLA RATANASARA: I think that the Christian vision of the global situation that was expressed in the Christian talks really takes our hearts! I think my Buddhist friends will agree with me that it is very rare to hear these kinds of large-hearted statements. The vision of global unity will succeed in the future. People are fed up with the terrible things that are happening in the world today.

In Asia, particularly in the Theravada Buddhist countries, we have taken the concept of *dukkha*, suffering, very seriously. We are guided by this principle. Buddha understood human suffering and he provided a way out. However, now the Buddhist communities are not united on how to address this problem on the social, political, and economic levels. Their major focus has been on how to find your own personal way out of suffering. For example, in Thailand people do not want Buddhist monks to get involved in social action. They say that the monks should be in the temple to receive alms and to practice meditation.

But, in spite of this resistance, in Asia the Buddhist *Sangha* has taken into consideration the social needs of the people and has developed social

Asia and joined some Theravada Buddhists in Thailand. That experience was a watershed in my life that led me into the Catholic Church, I am sure of that. My spiritual journey I consider to be the most essential thing about my life. This encounter has been a kind of culmination, and yet also a step in fostering that vision of the future around which we have gathered here this week.

DAVID STEINDL-RAST: I was asked to say a few words to conclude our reflections about our encounter. The word that comes to mind is *gratefulness*. But, even the word *gratefulness* has a new and fuller meaning in this context. I have always known that gratefulness is our full response to the gratuitousness of all that there is. But now I would say that it is a full response to a gratuitousness that immediately echoes with the dependent arising of all. And that full response is precisely our emptying of ourselves in response to that dependently arising fullness. So, we learn new overtones and undertones to our own terms. And that, it seems, was one of the most important fruits of this encounter for me. It is definitely a first. I have attended quite a number of dialogues, but this has been a benchmark in the history of East-West dialogue as far as I can see.

This has been a real *monastic* dialogue. My impression is that the monastic experience as such, the monastic stance, the choice to be a monk, is not the choice to be a super-Buddhist or a super-Christian. But it is a human choice—it is one choice to live your human life. If you happen to live in a Christian country, you will become a Christian monk; and if you happen to live in a Buddhist place, you will become a Buddhist monk. On this monastic level, we can really meet one another as real brothers and sisters. While it is not necessary for *everybody* to meet on that monastic level, everyone can be enriched by our meeting here.

I asked Thomas Merton once whether he could have written the things that he wrote about the Christian faith if it had not been for his exposure to Buddhism. Usually when you asked him a question like that he would just laugh. But on that occasion he really thought for awhile about it; he did not answer right away. And then ten or fifteen minutes later he said, "To come back to this point that you raised, I do not believe that I could understand our Christian faith the way I understand it if it were not for the light of Buddhism." So just as many people who never had the opportunity to meet with Buddhists were influenced by Merton's meeting, many people can also be influenced through our actions, through our being, because we have had this opportunity. And I think that is far more important than our finding some doctrinal agreement, or pointing out the fine points of doctrinal disagreement, and so forth. I really do agree with

the Ven. Ratanasara who said, "Don't mix doctrines; but work together for peace."

I am so excited about this encounter not because it was so good, but because it has opened us up for a whole new turn in the road. It has opened up a whole new stretch for us to go. We have come a long way and we have a long way to go. And what should we remember? Before the Christians were called Christians, they were called the followers of the Way. So, it is very good to be *on the way*. Then, what can we take with us from our encounter here as we go ahead together on the way? I leave you with the following image from monastic daily life.

We have lots of mice in our cells, and most of us do not like those mousetraps that kill the mice. So, we have what is called a "Have-a-Heart" trap. It is a little box, and you put some peanut butter in it, and the mouse goes in it but cannot get out. Within two minutes, you can catch the mouse that is in the cell. But then you have the problem of how to get rid of this mouse. So, you take it about a quarter of a mile into the woods—because these mice know very well how to get back into the cell. Somebody even put a little marker on a mouse's ear, and that same mouse came back three times! But now you have got the mouse to the woods, and you want to get her out of this box, and she does not come out. So, you turn it upside down and you shake it. But this little mouse clings with all her little paws to this trap. So, the direction that I would suggest is, let us identify the traps to which we cling, and then let us let loose and go ahead! That is my program for the future, and that is what I take along from our encounter.

Donald Mitchell: I have been asked to say a few words on behalf of those of us who have been involved in the organizing of this event for the past two years. In responding to the wishes of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we intended this week to be a period of time in which there would be a blending of many different voices—Christians and Buddhists—within the silence of this wonderful Abbey of Gethsemani. We invited people who we felt were not only knowledgeable about spirituality, but could also listen with their hearts to other voices, both Christian and Buddhist. And we wanted to enrich our dialogue with the voices of chanting, of liturgy, of ritual, and of monastic living. We also wanted you to hear each other's voices in the quiet times when you could meet as dyads.

All of this made for a tremendously full week of listening, and I wondered how people were going to hold up. I thought that this is more of a *sesshin*, in the Zen sense, than a conference! And it was not a conference,