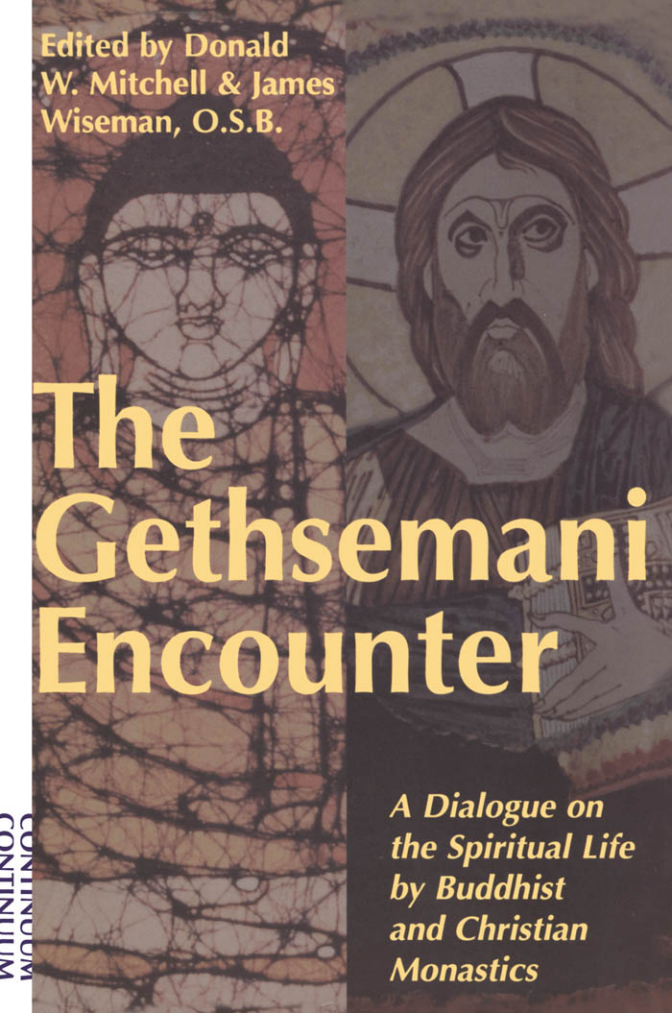


Edited by Donald
W. Mitchell & James
Wiseman, O.S.B.



The Gethsemani Encounter

*A Dialogue on
the Spiritual Life
by Buddhist
and Christian
Monastics*

THE
GETHSEMANI
ENCOUNTER



This page intentionally left blank

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.

1999

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

Copyright © 1997 by Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of The Continuum Publishing Company.

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

ISBN 0-8264-1165-7 (pbk)

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



Foreword

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA ix

Preface

PIERRE-FRANÇOIS DE BÉTHUNE, O.S.B. xi

Introduction

DONALD W. MITCHELL AND
JAMES A. WISEMAN, O.S.B. xvii

Part One: Talks on the Spiritual Life

One: Journey and Dialogue 3

1. How We Reached This Point: Communication Becoming Communion

PASCALINE COFF, O.S.B. 4

2. Dialogue and Unity: A Buddhist Perspective

VEN. DR. HAVANPOLA RATANASARA 9

Two: Ultimate Reality and Spirituality 18

1. Nirvana, Buddhahood and the Spiritual Life

JEFFREY HOPKINS 19

2. God, Creation and the Spiritual Life

DONALD W. MITCHELL 27

Three: Prayer and Meditation 34

1. Mindfulness and Loving-Kindness Meditation

VEN. DR. DHAMMARAKKHITA 35

2. *On Zazen*
ZOKETSU NORMAN FISCHER 41
3. *Harmony, Dialogue and Meditation*
HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA 46
4. *The Contemplative Life*
JAMES A. WISEMAN, O.S.B. 54
5. *Lectio Divina*
MARY MARGARET FUNK, O.S.B. 60

- Four: *Growth and Development* 68
 1. *Stages in the Buddhist Path of Purity*
VEN. DR. M. VAJIRAGNANA 69
 2. *The Path of Self-Inquiry in Zen Buddhism*
ESHIN NISHIMURA 74
 3. *The Path to Calm Abiding*
HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA 76
 4. *Prayer as Path*
PIERRE-FRANÇOIS DE BÉTHUNE, O.S.B. 82
 5. *Spiritual Experiences on the Path of Prayer*
GILCHRIST LAVIGNE, O.C.S.O. 88

- Five: *Community and Guidance* 99
 1. *Teaching Meditation in the Buddhist Community*
VEN. DR. CHUEN PHANGCHAM 101
 2. *The Women's Sangha in Taiwan*
VEN. DR. YIFA 107
 3. *The Role of Ch'an Teachers in China*
VEN. DR. SHENG-YEN 111
 4. *Spiritual Guidance and the Attainment of Nirvana*
HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA 117
 5. *The Spiritual Guide*
SR. DONALD CORCORAN, O.S.B. CAM. 124
 6. *Community, Church and the Contemplative Life*
ARMAND VEILLEUX, O.C.S.O. 129

Six: Spirituality and Society 135

1. The Human Family

VEN. MAHA GHOSANANDA 137

2. Worldly *Bodhisattvas*: Zen Awakening and Social Transformation

VEN. SAMU SUNIM 140

3. The *Bodhisattva* and Society

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA 146

4. Christian Holiness

JOSEPH GERRY, O.S.B. 153

5. Building the Reign of God

EWERT COUSINS 159

Part Two: Topics in the Spiritual Life

Seven: Mind and Virtue 169

1. Mind 170

2. Anger 174

3. Purity 181

4. Stages 184

5. Love 188

6. Humility 192

Eight: Method and Experience 194

1. Teacher 195

2. Language 201

3. Scripture 203

4. Practice 207

5. Experience 212

6. Discernment 215

7. Grace 218

Nine: Tragedy and Transformation 226

1. Suffering 227
2. Sacrifice 231
3. Violence 237
4. Social Action 241
5. Tolerance 246
6. Women's Issues 248
7. Unity 252

Epilogue 256

1. A Tribute to Thomas Merton
FR. JAMES CONNER, O.C.S.O. 257
2. A Tribute to Thomas Merton
HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA 260
3. Final Reflections 261

Notes 279

List of Participants 287

Glossary 295

Foreword



It was a great source of happiness for me to join my Christian and Buddhist brothers and sisters in the Gethsemani Encounter. I was particularly pleased that we should meet at the monastery that was once home to Thomas Merton. Although we did not know each other very long, in his large-hearted faith and burning desire to know, I felt the inspiration of a kindred spirit.

For those of us who attended, this gathering of dedicated monks, nuns and lay spiritual practitioners was proof, if it were needed, that the purpose of religion is not to build beautiful churches or temples; it is to cultivate positive human qualities such as tolerance, generosity and love. Fundamental to Buddhism and Christianity, indeed to every major world religion, is the belief that we must reduce our selfishness and serve others.

Unfortunately, due to suspicion and misunderstanding, religion sometimes causes more quarrels than it solves. I believe that one religion, like a single type of food, cannot hope to satisfy all. Depending on their different mental dispositions, some people benefit from one teaching, others from another. All faiths, despite their contradictory philosophies, possess the ability to produce fine warmhearted human beings. Therefore, there is every reason to appreciate and respect all forms of spiritual practice.

Every religion and culture has its distinguishing characteristics. For Tibetans, the emphasis for many centuries has been on developing and upholding inner values such as compassion and wisdom. These are more important to us than acquiring material wealth, fame or success. We regard inner strength, gentleness, love, compassion, wisdom and a stable mind as the most important treasures a human being can collect in his or her lifetime. However, I am aware that this can lead to a kind of peaceful complacency. I feel that we Buddhists have much to learn from our Christian brothers and sisters. We are all aware of the inner peace that

can be found in prayer and meditation, but our Christian friends may have a richer experience of bringing that inner peace to bear in practical ways in the generous service of others.

Gatherings of spiritual practitioners from different backgrounds, such as the Gethsemani Encounter, are of immense value. I believe it is extremely important that we extend our understanding of each other's spiritual practices and traditions. This is not necessarily done in order to adopt them ourselves, but to increase our opportunities for mutual respect. Sometimes, too, we encounter something in another tradition that helps us better appreciate something in our own. Consequently, 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
January 1997
Dharamsala, India

Preface



The Buddhist-Christian encounter at Gethsemani will remain as a reference point for the future of interfaith dialogue. The success of this historic encounter depended upon two elements: the long history of interfaith contacts that led us to Gethsemani, and the deep spirit of dialogue that characterizes intermonastic encounters. At Gethsemani, we gathered the well-ripened fruits of a long interfaith collaboration. And the spiritual climate at the Abbey of Gethsemani during this week of dialogue left behind an understanding that such spiritual exchanges are not only occasions of mutual aid on the spiritual journey—in terms of mutual understanding, respect, and encouragement—but they are in and of themselves spiritual experiences that until the present were difficult even to imagine. Therefore, a long preparation, both historically and spiritually, was necessary to produce this profound quality of dialogue.

While undertaking his spiritual journey in Asia in 1968, Thomas Merton met with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. During his three days of conversations with His Holiness at Dharamsala, “a great affection” was born, as Merton noted in his journal: “I believe . . . that there is a real spiritual bond between us.”¹ The Dalai Lama felt that Merton was his “spiritual brother,” and called him a “Catholic geshe” (learned monk). From this friendship, His Holiness also developed a deep respect for all Christian monks and nuns.

One must remember, however, that during his lifetime Thomas Merton was not very well understood. Even five years after Merton’s death, the Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, Dom Rembert Weakland, concluded at a monastic conference in Bangalore that very few monastics were engaged in interfaith dialogue. So it was necessary for Cardinal Pignedoli, President of what is now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican, to write a letter to the Abbot Primate stating that intermonastic dialogue needed to be more systematically organized. Finally in 1978, ten years after the death of Thomas Merton, two dialogue commissions were created: what is now known as the “Monastic Interreligious Dialogue”

(MID) in North America, and the “Dialogue Inter-Monastic” (DIM) in Europe. With these commissions in place, the number of nuns and monks engaged in this path of interfaith dialogue grew in a sudden and remarkable way.

The wonderful fruits of this historic encounter of Christian and Buddhist spiritualities are presented in a talk in this book by Sr. Pascaline Coff, O.S.B. In brief, through the “Spiritual Exchange” in Europe since 1979, and the “Monastic Hospitality Program” in North America since 1981, Buddhist nuns and monks spent time living in Christian monasteries in the West, and Christian monastics were guests of Zen² and Tibetan monasteries in the East. This long history of profound experiences of shared spiritual life and dialogue brought us to the Gethsemani Encounter where an in-depth dialogue on the spiritual life was finally possible.

For Buddhists and Christians to make this historic step in our dialogue, MID needed years of preparation during which it drew on its long experience and its networking relationships in order to assemble at the Abbey of Gethsemani so many remarkable people trained in the spiritual life. Thanks to attentive organizing, this large gathering was able to unfold in monastic serenity, and to reveal in a remarkable way the profound communion that unites all seekers of the Truth.

However, it is important to remark here that the careful organization alone cannot explain the spiritual climate that we have known since the Gethsemani Encounter. This new climate of openness and unity is also the result of a process of interior evolution, a profound change in thinking, thanks to which the monastic orders, Buddhist and Christian, are now able to recognize themselves as forerunners of a spiritual unity that is prophetic for all humankind. So, let me say a few words about this evolution that brought us to Gethsemani; and then I will make some concluding remarks about the prophetic vision of the event.

In his 1974 letter to the Abbot Primate, Cardinal Pignedoli expressed the hope that he placed in the dialogue of Christian monastics with other religious. He made the remark that “the monk represents a point of contact and of mutual comprehension between Christians and Non-Christians. The presence of monastics in the Catholic Church is therefore, in itself, a bridge that joins us to all other religions.”³ However even with this great hope, during the first years of their existence the monastic commissions for dialogue had received, in effect, a mandate to limit their contacts to the level of religious practice in order not to risk errors at the theological level.⁴ The ensuing exchanges at the level of monastic practice were enormously fruitful. Contacts were established, friendships built and the foundations of trust and respect were laid for future dialogue.

No matter what, dialogue had to evolve. Everyone in the early encounters recognized that the work was much more vast than anyone had anticipated. And fortunately, the spiritual dynamics that animate our monastic life raised up and guided this natural evolution. The concrete process of this change is very interesting to study. Little by little, it became clear that monastics are particularly well predisposed for dialogue. Humility, so central to monastic spirituality, provides them with protection against presumption, indifference, and a lack of openness to new ideas. There is above all the first word of the *Rule of Benedict*, “*Obsculta*,” which directly invites one to “listen” with an attitude of respect for the spoken word—the Word of God, the word of the spiritual leader, but also all other spoken words. This will to honor the words of all people explains, moreover, why Christian monastics in the Middle Ages contributed so much to the safe-keeping of ancient culture.

Also, practice of *lectio divina*, taught early in the novice stage in the monastery or convent, formed the monks or nuns to discern the intention of God in the holy scriptures as well as in the unforeseen events in our history—including our participation in interfaith dialogue. Finally, the monastic virtue of hospitality must be mentioned. Certain ancient traditions sometimes concealed this practice that risked troubling the contemplative quietude. But here again, St. Benedict allowed himself to be guided by the Gospel in demanding that monasteries offer unconditional welcome to guests. We should note that this hospitality is not practiced solely because of the goodness of the monastics, but it is also initiated by the hope the monastics place in meeting others. The monastics know, in faith, that the other could be a messenger of God who is carrying a providential word.

One can easily see that all these attitudes, so characteristic of monastic spirituality, provide an excellent school for dialogue. Indeed, while monastics are people of silence, they are above all people of spiritual experience. And this experience that surpasses words can nevertheless be placed in communication with persons who have similar experiences, thus establishing a dialogue in the deepest meaning of the word. This is what Thomas Merton expressed after his meeting with Chatral Rimpoche on November 6, 1968:

The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow *on the edge* of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it—and that it was a grace for us to meet one another.⁵

The greatest spiritual experiences do not produce insignificant words. And even the words that are used in the endeavor to realize such experiences are, in the monastic life, situated in relation to the mysterious reality that gives them their force. Therefore, interfaith dialogue most harmoniously opens up in the monastic context where the words are less explicit but more profound. To restate the image of Jean-Claude Basset, "It is here less a question of establishing bridges than of excavating an underground."⁶

As the communication evolved in the intermonastic encounters between Buddhists and Christians, the excavation of spiritual depth also progressed. Soon more and more monastics, both Buddhist and Christian, became involved in spiritual discussions. While the dialogue was always well rooted in their monastic lives, it became less and less restricted to only monastic topics. In allowing themselves always to be guided by their monastic *Rule*, the monks and nuns were brought so far on the journey of dialogue that they discovered that the encounter was itself a spiritual path. It gradually and naturally evolved to a profound discussion of the spiritual life in all its nuances as well as theological and philosophical implications for both traditions and, indeed, for all humankind.

Then with the Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi in 1986, a point of no return was reached. The act of Pope John Paul II gathering together representatives of all religions for a moment of prayer proclaimed to the world that religious persons should gather together in spiritual engagement for the integral welfare of all humanity. This initiative of Pope John Paul II disarmed any possible Catholic resistance to interfaith dialogue.

Henceforth the spiritual dialogue of monastics, Buddhist and Christian, was able to be presented to the public. It was no longer considered to be reserved for only certain monastic specialists. Rather, it became known as representing the most authentic type of interfaith dialogue. It was seen as such an important endeavor in the exploration of the spiritual life that its findings were viewed as being of great value to all humankind. It was in this new context that Cardinal Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, explicitly invited the commissions for monastic interfaith encounter to continue and to deepen this dialogue concerning the value of meditation and prayer for today's world.⁷ Because of this universal value of the spiritual life, monastics are not alone in endeavoring to pursue this "dialogue of spiritual experience," as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue designated it since 1984.⁸ All Christians are called to reach this level in their meetings with believers of

other religions. While happily there are many who do this, monastics are probably the best prepared.

So, it was on the foundation of spiritual fellowship having evolved into spiritual dialogue, and with the encouragement of the Church, that MID organized and hosted the Gethsemani Encounter not just for itself but for the spiritual enrichment of all humankind. The spiritual talks presented here, as well as parts of and reflections on the actual dialogue about central issues in the spiritual life, are precious treasures offered to humanity from the rich heritage of centuries of monastic experience, East and West. These words—spoken from the silence of deep religious experience—are words of encouragement, light and peace for all people faced with the hopelessness, darkness, and violence that grip our modern world. After almost thirty years of evolution in the spiritual encounter of our traditions, now we have come together as Christian and Buddhist practitioners to share with one another and with the world the challenge, wonder and promise of the spiritual life.

There are other forms of dialogue such as the “dialogue of life,” the “dialogue of works,” and the “dialogue of theological exchange.” While each one of these forms is indispensable, the “dialogue of religious experience” must remain at the horizon of all dialogue. We will never be able to formulate in an adequate way the mystery, the silence, the luminosity and the joy into which we journey. But communion in this spiritual journey defines dialogue’s ultimate task. Our experience attests to the fact that when this journey of dialogue is pursued, this communion effects a remarkable renewal in our spiritual life. Through our sharing about and communion in the spiritual life, we progress as Buddhists and as Christians toward our own ultimate goals. But more than this, this communion presents us with something novel in the spiritual life. The participants of the Gethsemani Encounter were able to ascertain this surprising dimension of spiritual communion in the atmosphere of the event.

Given this shared experience, when we read—during a tribute to Thomas Merton—one of his famous statements made at a conference in Calcutta in October of 1968, we understand that his prophetic words were not a lyrical flight or a utopian dream. What only a few rare people could understand in 1968 was openly revealed at Gethsemani to all the participants, Buddhists as well as Christians. All were profoundly touched by Merton’s description of the experience that we had lived during our days together:

[T]he deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.⁹

Pierre-François de Béthune, O.S.B.
Ottignies, Belgium
January 1997

Introduction



The inspiration for the Gethsemani Encounter happened at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993. Prior to the Parliament, Fr. Julian von Duerbeck, O.S.B., and Br. Wayne Teasdale proposed that the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) host an interfaith dialogue session at the Parliament with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders. MID is the official monastic organization of the Catholic Church in the United States, Canada and Central America responsible for intermonastic dialogue with other religions. Its members are men and women monastics in the Benedictine, Cistercian and Trappist traditions. The MID Board accepted the proposal to host a Buddhist-Christian dialogue at the Parliament; and a morning dialogue session on "Emptiness and Kenosis" was designed by Sr. Katherine Howard, O.S.B., and Patrick G. Henry, who also moderated the event.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama participated in that dialogue, and later—during the Parliament—suggested that the dialogue be continued in a monastic setting. Discussions were then held by MID members at the Parliament, and the idea of a weeklong, in-depth intermonastic encounter on the spiritual life at Gethsemani Abbey—home of Thomas Merton—began to be formulated. The encounter was seen as an opportunity to bring together, for an extended period of time in a monastic setting, a small group of Buddhist and Christian monastics who are mature practitioners and teachers of spirituality. They would live, practice, and celebrate together; and in that contemplative setting, they would dialogue about the practice of the spiritual life and its value for the world today. While there had been local intermonastic hospitality exchanges and dialogues in different parts of the world in the past, this would be the first time an organized international monastic dialogue on the spiritual life would be held at this global level of encounter.

After the Parliament, the MID Board agreed to explore the possibility of holding such an ambitious international, interreligious encounter with

Buddhism; and Abbot Timothy Kelly, O.C.S.O., agreed to host the encounter at the Abbey of Gethsemani. However, first MID was committed to holding a meeting on Hinduism in the summer of 1994 for the MID “contact persons”—monastics appointed by their abbots or prioresses to be responsible for interreligious dialogue at their monasteries in Central and North America. So, it was not until the fall of 1994 that Wayne Teasdale traveled to Dharamsala, India, to meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and discuss arrangements for the Gethsemani Encounter. His Holiness was very supportive of MID’s plans; so in the spring of 1995, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, O.S.B., Executive Director of MID, asked Donald W. Mitchell to help organize the encounter as Patrick Henry had done for the Parliament session. The MID Board had used Mitchell’s book, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (Paulist Press, 1991), to prepare for the Parliament dialogue.

Mitchell and Funk began designing a program and agenda for the Gethsemani Encounter during the spring of 1995. The result of their collaboration was taken to Dharamsala during the summer of 1995 by Funk, Sr. Pascaline Coff, O.S.B., Br. Aaron Raverty, O.S.B., and Fr. James Wiseman, O.S.B., who was the Chairperson of MID. His Holiness the Dalai Lama agreed to the encounter design and topics for discussion. Then in the fall of 1995, the program and agenda for the Gethsemani Encounter was finalized by the MID Board, and Mitchell began the task of selecting and inviting the Buddhist participants while Funk began to select and invite the Christian participants.

Theravadin Buddhist monastics were invited from the *Sanghas* in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia; while lay practitioners were also invited from the newly emerging American Theravadin communities. Zen Buddhist monastics were invited from the traditions of Taiwan, Korea and Japan; while again lay practitioners were invited from the American Zen communities. Tibetan Buddhist monastics were invited from the Geluk lineage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama; and American lay practitioners were invited from both the Geluk and Kagyu lineages. All the lay practitioners had extensive monastic experience, and their presence blended new Western voices into the dialogue. Care was taken to include women’s voices from each tradition. In this regard, a Buddhist nun from the Fokuangshan Buddhist Order was invited to represent the new wave of Buddhist women monastics in Asia. Most of the Buddhist participants were living in Buddhist communities in the United States; for example, in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boulder, Minneapolis, Chicago, Atlanta and Washington, D.C. The hope was that the Gethsemani Encounter would sow the seeds for future local dialogues between

Buddhist and Christian spiritual communities in the United States and around the world.

The Christian monastics were invited from both the Benedictine and Trappist traditions in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia. Most of the Christian participants were MID Board members or MID advisors, who had years of experience in spirituality and interreligious relations. The Gethsemani Encounter was seen to be so important in the history of the Catholic Church and Christian monasticism that an invitation was extended to the Abbot General of the Trappist Order, Fr. Bernardo Olivera, O.C.S.O. Since the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order had recently died, his secretary, Fr. Jacques Côté, O.S.B., was also invited. Invitations were sent as well to the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and to Fr. Pierre-François de Béthune, O.S.B., Secretary General of MID worldwide. Bishop Joseph Gerry, O.S.B., was invited to represent the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States. Olivera, Côté and Gerry all accepted their invitations to the Gethsemani Encounter, as did Béthune, who also represented the Vatican. Among the MID advisors were also some priests, and lay practitioners—Catholic and Protestant—with experience in dialogue with Buddhism. In the end, 25 Buddhist and 25 Christian spiritual leaders, teachers and practitioners from around the world were invited to the Gethsemani Encounter by MID and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We have included short biographical sketches of all the Buddhists and Christians involved in the encounter in the List of Participants section of this volume.

During the spring of 1996, the final touches were made to the encounter schedule by integrating rituals and practice sessions. Also, all the encounter participants were paired, Buddhist with Christian, in “dyads” that met once each day to allow for more intimate dialogue. In the final planning for the encounter, it was decided by the MID Board to allow interested contact persons, donors and media persons to attend as observers. The dialogue would be held at one end of the chapter room of the Abbey with the observers at the other end watching the proceedings. The observers would meet once each day to process the dialogue with the Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman and with Patrick Henry. A special session on the final day of the encounter was set aside for the observers to share their reflections with the participants.

It was also during the spring of 1996 that the Christian participants, who were to present talks at the Gethsemani Encounter, met at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Indianapolis, Indiana, for a weekend workshop. At the workshop, Donald Mitchell presented lectures on the three forms of Buddhist spirituality that would be represented at Gethsemani, namely,

the Zen, Theravadin, and Tibetan traditions. These are the three types of monastic Buddhism with which MID had intermonastic exchanges in the past. After Mitchell's presentations, the Christian talks for the Gethsemani Encounter were presented, and suggestions were made for how to make them more accessible to Buddhists. In this way, the Christian spiritual talks were crafted to express the experience of not just one person, but of a living spiritual tradition. It was felt that this workshop was instrumental in helping the encounter participants dialogue at a deeper level of engagement.

The first actual meeting of the Gethsemani Encounter was held during the evening of July 22, 1996. After dinner, there was a tree planting ceremony in the monastery courtyard, where a spruce tree was planted by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Abbot Timothy Kelly. The evening program in the chapter room, which followed the ceremony, included a word of welcome and orientation by James Wiseman, and a talk by Pascaline Coff on the spiritual journey of dialogue leading to the Gethsemani Encounter. These presentations were followed by a "philosophical moment" during which Jeffrey Hopkins and Donald Mitchell presented the philosophical visions behind the traditions of Buddhist and Christian spiritualities. Both speakers presented what they felt persons in the other tradition should understand about their tradition's ideas and ideals as a prelude to dialogue. A closing blessing was then given by Abbot James Conner, O.C.S.O. We have included Coff's, Hopkins's and Mitchell's talks in this volume.

For the next five days of the encounter, our mornings began with sitting meditation in the Skakel Chapel at 5:45 a.m. Each sitting was followed by a Buddhist or Christian ritual at 6:15. Breakfast was at 7:00, with the first dialogue session starting at 8:00. The morning sessions included talks and dialogue on an essential element of the spiritual life as seen from two of the three Buddhist perspectives represented at the encounter. The sessions were followed by a Christian or Buddhist ritual at 11:00, and lunch at noon. After lunch, there was time for rest, sharing in dyads, or the meeting of the observers with Robert Thurman and Patrick Henry. The afternoon sessions on the Christian perspective concerning the spiritual issue being discussed for that day began at 2:30 p.m. ending with vespers in the church at 5:30. Dinner was at 6:00, with the evening session starting at 7:00. The evening sessions presented the third Buddhist view concerning the day's spiritual theme. The evenings ended at 8:30, with a closing blessing, or a special ritual for both Buddhists and Christians. On the final day, July 27, 1996, the encounter concluded with the morning session that finished with a final Christian blessing and Buddhist ritual.

Each of the different aspects of the week—the talks, dialogues, dyad encounters, rituals, periods of meditation, meals—were parts of an integral whole. They blended voices and silence into a unique and profound encounter experience in the contemplative atmosphere of the monastery. There were no “safe places,” as Fr. Thomas Baima put it, into which one could retreat—we plunged into a deep engagement with each other and remained in that encounter for the full week. This may have been a bit demanding at times, but there was a sense that we were not there just for ourselves; but were in fact living and working together for the benefit of humankind. Hence, as Ewert Cousins remarked, there was a spiritual “treasure chest” that opened up right on the very first evening, and on the final day, it was “still there.”

We have tried to share in this book the jewels of spiritual insight and advice that we discovered in the treasures of our spiritualities that have been mined for thousands of years by the great saints and mystics of our traditions. Besides the talks from the first evening, we have included the talks presented during the four full days of the Gethsemani Encounter at the morning, afternoon and evening sessions. The four daily topics for the encounter were: (1) “The Practice of Prayer and Meditation in the Spiritual Life,” (2) “The Stages in the Process of Spiritual Development,” (3) “The Role of the Teacher and the Community in the Spiritual Life,” and (4) “The Spiritual Goals of Personal and Social Transformation.” We have also included the talk by the Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara on the Buddhist view of interreligious dialogue given on the morning of July 24 in conjunction with a Theravadin ritual.

Each of these talks was intended to provide a short and insightful glimpse into the dynamics of Buddhist and Christian spirituality. These insights were then broadened and deepened in the context of the dialogue itself in ways that we hope will bring the encounter of our traditions to a new level, and will set the agenda for future spiritual dialogues for years to come. We have included an edited version of the dialogue as it explores the treasures of the spiritual life in both traditions. Also included are the tributes to Thomas Merton, offered by James Conner and His Holiness the Dalai Lama at a memorial service on the morning of July 25, and the final reflections given by the observers and others on the last morning of the encounter.

The chapters in which we have placed the talks, dialogues, tributes and reflections are all preceded by words of introduction—so we will not repeat ourselves here. However, we would like to note that the talks and dialogues led all of us in the Gethsemani Encounter into a spiritual adventure of discovery, both of each other and of ourselves. As monastic

and lay practitioners, Buddhists and Christians, men and women, we felt that we were exploring the nature of our humanity as well as our spiritual potential as individuals and society. There was a sense that what we were discussing—and what was happening—at Gethsemani was relevant to the destiny of all humankind. There was an awareness that even with our differences, we were experiencing a dialogical movement from, in Merton's words, "communication" to "communion," from speaking with one another to being one with each other at the deepest level of encounter. We were not just speaking to each other about the spiritual life; we were, in the words of one observer, "giving birth to" a deep communion in our spiritual life together. This is a new spiritual possibility for humankind. So, our Gethsemani experience was, we think, an epiphany for all humankind: a profound unity, peace and harmony in the midst of the rich diversity of humankind is possible. And authentic spirituality can contribute to this evolution in the individual and social nature of humanity. We offer this book to serious spiritual seekers of all traditions as a contribution to spirituality seeking the realization of this vision of a more united and peaceful pluralistic world community.

There are many persons we would like to thank for their invaluable contribution to the Gethsemani Encounter and this volume. Besides the Christian and Buddhist participants, we would especially like to thank Abbot Timothy Kelly and the monks of the Abbey of Gethsemani for their wonderful hospitality. In this regard, special thanks to Fr. Paschal Phillips, O.C.S.O., and Grace Worthem, coordinator of the Gethsemani Guest House, who worked so hard before and during the encounter. We also want to thank Stephen Hays, who provided security for His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the encounter in general; Julian von Duerbeck and Sr. GilChrist Lavigne, O.C.S.O., who coordinated the rituals; Sr. Johanna Becker, O.S.B., and Br. Harold Thibodeau, O.C.S.O., who designed the dialogue environment; Michael Fitzpatrick and Patricia Day, who provided the music; Jacques Côté and Sr. Joann Hunt, O.S.B., who photographed the encounter; Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler, Robert Thurman and Patrick Henry, who were responsible for the observers; Br. Wayne Teasdale, for his contacts; and Br. David Steindl-Rast, who was the moderator for the entire dialogue. Rinchen Dharlo, from the Office of Tibet, and Mary Margaret Funk deserve our deepest gratitude for their tireless efforts in helping us organize the encounter. For helping to bring the dialogue to a broader audience, we would like to thank Kate Olson, from the Public Broadcasting System; Karen Michele, from National Public Radio; John Buescher, from the Voice of America; and the following journalists: Dianne April, Fr. Murray Bodo, O.F.M., Judith Cebula, Jeffrey Cox,

Matthew Greenblatt, Fenton Johnson and Peter Smith. As for preparing this book, we want to extend our warmest appreciation to Doris Cross, for her transcriptions of the dialogue tapes; Gene Gollogly, for his support of our publishing project; Jeffrey Hopkins and Robin Mitchell for their translations; and Beth Turner, for her long hours of typing. Finally, we would like to thank the many generous organizations and people whose contributions were necessary to make the inspirations of a few people at the Parliament of the World's Religions a reality for us all—indeed for the world: the Fetzer Foundation, the Cudahy Foundation, Markell Brooks, Werner Mark Linz, Monique and Lester Anderson, Jane Owen, Tommy O'Callahan, Daniel Ward, Odette Baumer-Despeigne, and the Abbey of Gethsemani.

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

This page intentionally left blank

PART ONE



Talks
on the
Spiritual
Life

This page intentionally left blank

1

Journey and Dialogue



One night, almost 2,000 years ago in the Garden of Gethsemani, Jesus Christ confronted the forces of darkness and death. During another night, about 500 years earlier, Gotama Buddha confronted those same forces at Bodhgaya. Now, centuries later, it was in the Abbey of Gethsemani that Buddhists and Christians confronted together the forces of suffering that still plague humankind. When one enters the monastery, one does not leave the world behind, but takes it into the monastery in one's prayer. So, as we gathered in the 150-year-old abbey, we were not only bringing the joys and hopes of our modern world, but also its anger, pain, divisions and violence. We brought all aspects of our shared world into our dialogue, our meditation and our prayer.

Jesus entered Gethsemani intending to pray, and Buddha entered Bodhgaya intending to meditate. We had come together intending to share with each other, as fellow pilgrims, the spiritual life we were leading. But then, as we opened our hearts to each other in deep and authentic dialogue, we found that, in the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, "We are all struggling with the same evil spirits." We identified these spirits as being such factors of the mind and heart as delusion and ignorance, greed and anger, hatred and revenge. And we identified their antidotes in clarity and wisdom, loving kindness and compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation.

As we shared these spiritual insights, and, more importantly, as we shared our spiritual lives, we found that—in the words of Thomas Merton—our "conversation" became "communion." We were all profoundly touched by this reality of spiritual communion; we even felt marked for life by this deep realization of unity. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said with joy, "God and the Buddhas are very happy with what is happening here. We are receiving many blessings from above."

But how did we get to this spiritual point? We had the sense that we alone were not creating this epiphany. Rather, we had entered a place

that had been prepared for it by the lives of many who had gone before us. In her talk, that was given at the opening ceremony on the eve of the dialogue, Sr. Pascaline Coff, O.S.B., gives us a glimpse at what the journey of dialogue has been for those who prepared the way to Gethsemani.

On the Catholic side, a choice of dialogue was made over 30 years ago. Then, a seed was planted in 1968 in Bangkok with the death of Thomas Merton at the first intermonastic conference called to explore the way of dialogue with other religions. Organizations dedicated to interfaith exchanges and dialogues were founded, and the modern encounter of Buddhist and Christian monastics began. Eventually, based on heartfelt openness, spiritual friendship, and concrete collaboration, His Holiness the Dalai Lama suggested that we had reached the point for an in-depth encounter on the spiritual life. In her talk, Coff presents the hope that now, after such a long and inspiring road to Gethsemani, our communication can become communion. What better place for this prophetic vision of Merton's to be realized than at his spiritual home in the Abbey of Gethsemani?

The Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara delivered his talk at a morning program presented by the Theravada Buddhist delegation from Southeast Asia. In reading it, one might think that he was influenced in what he says by Coff's presentation. However, both talks were written prior to the dialogue. Ratanasara emphasizes the need today to realize, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "the unity that already exists." Dialogue, Ratanasara says, provides the environment in which such a unity can be realized.

But more than this, Ratanasara holds that this "unity" embraces the whole human family and must be recognized and realized socially for the benefit of all humankind. Since we came to Gethsemani from all over the world with our differences of religion, language, culture, etc., by the unity that we realize through our dialogue, we can show the rest of the world that this is possible for them as well. Ratanasara concludes by calling on our spiritual traditions to use their wisdom and counsel to teach the world to create "a truly harmonious existence" through choosing the path of dialogue and living together the spiritual values that unite us.

How We Reached This Point: Communication Becoming Communion

PASCALINE COFF, O.S.B.

This "point" where we are will unfold with all its richness and mystery as the next few hours and days together run their course. This point of

spiritual exchange between Buddhist and Christian monastics began decades ago as “a preliminary experience in hospitality,” “a prelude to in-depth dialogue,” and “a mutually agreed ground-breaking first step.” Over the years, this point has become, in the words of William Johnston, “Friendship, the crown of authentic dialogue.” And now we have gathered together in this point of friendship to take the next step on the journey of spiritual dialogue. In the prophetic words of Thomas Merton, the very *raison d’être* for our presence here at Gethsemani is to realize “communication” that has become “communion.”

The Journey Begins

Pope John XXIII was Pope only ninety days when he announced his surprise plan to convoke the Roman Catholic Church’s 21st ecumenical council. When the prelates and bishops of the Church assembled in Rome and the council began on October 11, 1962, the pontiff was eighty years old. This council, known as Vatican II, was a gift to the whole human family in many ways. But according to Karl Rahner, one of the greatest theologians of this century, one of the greatest enactments of the Second Vatican Council was the document called *Nostra Aetate* (Oct. 28, 1965) on “The Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” In this document, for the first time in her history, the Roman Catholic Church publicly proclaimed that truth is to be found in other religions. A special secretariat was called into being (May 17, 1964) to promote the Church’s relationship with other religions. It was the president of this secretariat, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, who wrote to the Benedictine Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland in 1974 to urge that Christian monks and nuns be invited to “pursue” being a “bridge and contact-point” for promoting mutual understanding between Christians and persons of other faiths. From that time forward, monasticism would have an essential role in this encounter.

Thomas Merton in Dialogue

In 1968, the world’s Benedictine abbots sponsored their first Asian East-West Intermonastic Conference in Bangkok. It was this conference that brought Thomas Merton to the East and eventually to visit with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It was a watershed beginning for East-West intermonastic dialogue. Two other Asian Conferences followed sponsored by Aide Inter-Monastères (AIM), an organization of the Benedictine Confederation which was given the responsibility to facilitate interfaith dialogue: Bangalore in 1973, and Sri Lanka in 1980. Thomas Merton, as many know, died during the Bangkok conference, just after he gave his

own presentation on the second day. From his place beyond, he no doubt has had an influence on all that has transpired from then until now—on how we got to this “point.” Indeed it has been said that “His [Merton’s] death had the same effect of the seed, which in dying produces much fruit.”¹

The Founding of MID

In response to Cardinal Pignedoli’s request to our Abbot Primate, in 1977 two groups of monks and nuns were invited by AIM to come together and discuss the future possibilities for East-West encounters. One meeting was held in Petersham, Massachusetts; and the second was in Loppem, Belgium. Then in January of the following year, at the invitation of AIM, a monastic organization was founded at the Rickenbach Center in Clyde, Missouri, choosing the name of “AIM’s North American Board for East-West Dialogue.” Later, this organization took the name “Monastic Interreligious Dialogue” (MID). Four of the six initial members invited by AIM are present today at this auspicious Gethsemani Encounter: Abbot Armand Veilleux, Sr. Donald Corcoran, Sr. Gilchrist Lavigne and Sr. Pascaline Coff. Some months later, a European monastic group met again at Loppem and chose the name “Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique” (DIM). The purpose of these working groups was to stimulate interest among Western monastics in the ideas and values present in Eastern religions, and to assist in the development of intermonastic dialogue, especially between Buddhist and Christian monastics. In 1979, MID cosponsored the ten-year Thomas Merton Commemoration at Columbia University in New York. This was the year of His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s first visit to the United States.

The Naropa Connection

In 1980, MID was invited to co-plan an East-West conference sponsored by the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. Fr. Thomas Keating and Br. David Steindl-Rast, former members of MID, were invited subsequently to be speakers at the conference.

In 1981, the Naropa conference included His Holiness the Dalai Lama as one of its speakers. Two members of MID asked to be present at an audience with His Holiness. It was during this semiprivate audience with some thirty others that the secretary of MID asked His Holiness if he was willing to send his monks to our American Christian monasteries. He smiled, looked pensively, and said: “Yes, but I have no money.” Abbot Lawrence Wagner spoke up and assured His Holiness that our American abbots would be happy to pool their resources in order to cover interna-

tional airfare, and that the American monasteries would be glad to host Tibetan monks. And so began the Intermonastic Hospitality Exchanges between American Christian and Tibetan Buddhist monastics. We should also note that DIM has also hosted numerous exchanges with Tibetan and other Buddhist (especially Zen) monastics in Europe and Asia.

Exchanges and Dialogues

Phase I of the MID exchange was in 1982. One Tibetan monk (Ven. Kunchok Sithar) spent four months (July 25–November 22) visiting six Midwestern Christian monasteries. He came as Ven. Kunchok and left as “Brother” Kunchok. MID sent to each hosting monastery a *Source Book on Buddhism*, and also an “Outline of the Mass for Buddhists” written by Prof. Roger Corless.

Phase II in 1983 brought three Tibetan monks (Ven. Kalsang Damdul, Ven. Lobsang Choepel, and Ven. Lobsang Sonam) for five months (April 21–September 15) to thirty Christian monasteries and some convents in the United States. Then in 1985 in New Jersey, in preparation for the 100th anniversary of the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions, four Tibetan monks and two MID monastics met together: Ven. Kunchok Sithar, Ven. Kalsang Damdul, Ven. Lhokdor, Ven. Sonam, Fr. Thomas Keating and Sr. Pascaline Coff.

Phase III in 1986 brought nuns more directly into the exchange. Six American Benedictines (Fr. Donald Grabner, Fr. Gabriel Coless, Fr. Timothy Kelly, Sr. Ruth Fox, Sr. Bede Luetkemeyer and Sr. Pascaline Coff) spent six weeks (September 1–October 15) visiting twenty-six Tibetan monasteries and four Tibetan nunneries in both north and south India. The dialogues with Buddhist monks in the Dialectic School and with seven Geshes in the Gyurme Tantric Monastery at Hunsur were challenging and rewarding. The highlight of the visits was an interview with His Holiness the Dalai Lama at his home in Dharamsala.

Phase IV in 1988 brought three Tibetan monastics (Ven. Kunchok Tsering, Acharya Ngawang Samten and a nun, Ven. Tenzin Dunsang) to the United States for two months (June 1–July 30) where they visited twenty-two American Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries and convents. At this point, His Holiness Pope John Paul II himself entered the encounter when he met these Tibetan monastics in Rome as they were returning home to India.

In 1989, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on December 11. The announcement reached His Holiness in Newport Beach, California, on October 6 when MID was scheduled to have an interview with him to assure him of our support for his Five

Point Peace Plan which he had presented in 1987. The Dalai Lama and several members of MID were involved in the Contemplative Congress: *Harmonia Mundi*, which was being held there October 3–7.

In 1991, MID shared a press conference with His Holiness in Tesuque, N.M., regarding the document on “Non-Violence and the Incompatibility of Religions and War.” Members of MID present included: Fr. Thomas Keating, Sr. Katherine Howard, Sr. Johanna Becker and Prof. Wayne Teasdale, coauthor of the document.

Phase V in 1992 brought four American monastics (Fr. Kevin Hunt, Br. Harold Thibodeau, Sr. Katherine Howard, and Sr. Pascaline Coff) during six weeks (August 30–October 15) to twenty Tibetan monasteries and four Tibetan nunneries in India. Besides dialoguing with monks at the Dialectic School, the American monastics had several hours of inter-monastic dialogue with five Geshes at the Library of Tibetan Works. Again, the highlight of the exchange and dialogues was the interview with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Based on these ten-plus years of contact, hospitality and friendship, a special intermonastic dialogue between His Holiness the Dalai Lama, other Buddhist leaders, and members of MID was held during the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago. The topic for this first organized dialogue was *kenosis*, or “self-emptying,” in Buddhist and Christian spirituality. After this more formal encounter, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that he felt the ground was prepared for a serious in-depth dialogue on the spiritual life in our two traditions. He suggested that we invite 25 Buddhist and 25 Christian spiritual masters to live together for a full week of shared practice and dialogue on the spiritual life. He also asked if it might be possible for our encounter to be held at Gethsemani, the home of his friend Thomas Merton. It was this suggestion by His Holiness that has led us to this gathering today at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Phase VI in 1994 brought four Tibetan monastics (Ven. Geshe Damchoe Gyaltzen, Ven. Tsering Wangchok, and nuns Ven. Ngawang Chonzin and Ven. Tenzin Dechen) to the United States for four months (November 14–March 9). They were hosted in thirty American Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries and convents with more than one hundred public appearances. Interviewed on Voice of America, they were even heard by their own monastic friends back in Dharamsala.

Phase VII in 1995 followed on the heels of Phase VI. In the summer of 1995, four American Benedictine monastics (Fr. James Wiseman, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, Br. Aaron Raverty, and Sr. Pascaline Coff) journeyed to Tibet and India for five weeks (June 15–July 28) visiting ten monasteries and three nunneries in Tibet, and dialoguing with

monastics in twelve monasteries and three nunneries in the exiled Tibetan communities in north India. They reported challenging dialogues at the Dialectic School, Gaden Choeling and Dolma Ling nunneries as well as an enriching two hours at Bir in the Dzongzer Institute's monastic garden with five Tibetan professors. As with all of these American intermonastic hospitality exchanges and dialogues in India, the highlight was with His Holiness the Dalai Lama—sharing experiences in Tibet and preparing for this Gethsemani Encounter. The four Americans were given places of honor at two of the 60th birthday celebrations for His Holiness in Delhi and Dharamsala.

Finally in 1996, a new round of phases was created and begun between Tibetan Buddhist monastics in exile and Christian monastics in the United States. These new phases go beyond shared hospitality and friendship. They seek to concretely help our Buddhist brothers and sisters in exile in creative ways. For example, the new Phase I was an educational exchange. It brought six Tibetan monastics to the United States (Ven. Tenzin Tsepak, Ven. Tenzin Dhargye, Ven. Tenzin Choepel Rongpa, Tenzin Thutop, and nuns Ven. Tenzin Dechen and Ven. Tenzin Desel). This educational program has enabled these exiled Buddhist monks and nuns to study health care, computer skills and English within a Christian monastic context. This in-depth three month stay (March 1–May 31) was a mutually fruitful and enriching first step in a new and practical direction.

After many mountains, caves, harrowing Jeep rides, monsoons, landslides, soldiers, a one-eyed man/woman-eating mountain lion, giant spiders, hungry mice, and months of travel to monasteries and convents on both sides of the globe, we are here now at the Abbey of Gethsemani with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, MID Board members, advisers and contact persons from our monasteries—twenty-five strong—with twenty-five Buddhists, also strong, for a historic dialogue on the spiritual life. It will be the “longest and most demanding—yet most promising—dialogue on the spiritual life in the history of East-West encounter.” We are at the “point” where, based on a long and rich history of friendship, Thomas Merton's prophecy of communication becoming communion may be realized. And at what better place than here at Thomas Merton's own spiritual home?

Dialogue and Unity: A Buddhist Perspective

VEN. DR. HAVANPOLA RATANASARA

In his recently published work, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II made some observations with which I, as a Buddhist, wholly