

What are the problems of the nuclear age that you think we can solve, and how?

(Maha Ghosananda, Sister Vilma Seelaus, Dr. Richard Brown, Dr. Joan Halifax)

Maha Ghosananda: Brothers and sisters, our country of Cambodia has been greatly torn by strife, death and starvation. Our people have turned on each other and brother fights brother, and the whole world supplies our people with guns to kill each other. Now our people are brought to their one common element, to our one common light, to the middle path of the Dharma. There are no other paths right now. On the way, first we seek to awaken the Buddha nature, the Christ nature, the burning love of Christ for each of our people. Second, we seek to awaken the non-violent nature of all our people. Because war and guns and fighting have caused them only terrible suffering, it is time for peace right now. It is time for a non-violent resolution to all our problems. Third, we seek to rebuild the Sangha, the Buddhist community of Cambodia. We want to encourage Buddhist monks and nuns in temples to grow in Cambodia and all over the world. Fourth, we seek to rebuild the bridges between our people no matter how grave the difference between us.

We are united by our own Buddha nature, so we will build a bridge of unity, understanding and peace. We will journey

the context of this mystical tradition), that a new vision is opened up for them.

Our world being in this state of impasse, the solutions to the problems of the past no longer work. The American dream of hard work and analyzing the problem and finding a solution, in so many instances, doesn't work. This method hasn't solved our economic crises, our ecology problem, and the other problems that are so well known. I would like to suggest that each of our mystical traditions has something to offer not only in helping individuals in their own "dark night" but in the societal "dark night" that we are experiencing. In this area there can be a real breakthrough.

The other point I would like to make about contemporary problems is about the problems among the churches themselves, the conflict that is written on every page of human history. Recently I spent three months in Israel as the resource person at the Hope Center for Interfaith Understanding. My experience there was remarkable in discovering the bonds of friendship that have emerged as a result of the kind of work and contemplative reflection that happened among the persons who came there—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

Bonds of friendship have emerged not through doctrinal understanding, but from understanding among persons. Given the

About the Presenters

ZEN MASTER SEUNG SAHN was the first Korean Zen Master to live and teach in the United States. Author of three Zen books in English and several in Korean, he founded the Providence Zen Center in 1972 and the Kwan Um Zen School in 1983. This conference is the second ecumenical conference he has initiated since 1982.

Zen Master Seung Sahn: "If you have no idea, your ears, eyes, nose, tongue and body can all hear, see, smell, taste, think and do things correctly. We call that love and compassion."

SHARON SALZBERG, a founding teacher at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA, is one of a handful of Vipassana teachers in the West who completed training and received authorization to teach from Mahasi Sayadaw, the Vipassana master in Rangoon, Burma.

"The more we pay attention with acceptance, the more it becomes clear that we are simply a part of the natural universe."

SISTER VILMA SEELAUS, OCD, an experienced spiritual director and a Carmelite nun for 38 years, has published numerous

articles, pamphlets and tapes on the contemplative life, prayer, spirituality, and the spiritual needs of women. She is the Abbess of the Barrington, RI Carmel monastery.

Sister Vilma: "Each one of us is the very breath of God in our world. Like a child who needs to be in relationship to another



person in order to come to the sense of who it is, we need to come to our true identity through relatedness to God."

DAVID SULLIVAN, conference moderator, is director of research at South-Eastern Massachusetts University in North Dartmouth, MA.

David Sullivan: "We cannot be severed from our inter connectedness. Feel that assurance, that peace. Out of that great peace, anything may be ventured."

REV. DR. ROBERT K. SWEET, JR., an experienced Methodist conference leader, is superintendent of RISEM, Rhode Island Southeastern Massachusetts District of the Southern New England Conference of United Methodists. Pastor of Niantic Community Church, an ecumenical congregation, he has been active in youth and mission work.

Rev. Dr. Sweet: "I think there cannot be a separation of meditation and contemplative life from the action of faith. Whatever emphasis we've had on meditation, whatever teaching we've had about prayer, from the time we began to teach our children the simplest prayers of the faith, we have always understood there is a connection between our prayer and our action."

some thinking about the assignment. As I usually do in a situation like that, I took a clipboard with legal size lined paper, in which to put down however I happen to be reacting to that which I'm trying to formulate. I wrote down the question, "What are the problems of the nuclear age that you think we must solve and how?" I made two columns, one headed "problems" and the other headed "solutions."

Within a very short period of time, I had listed what I believe to be the problems. (I have found through the years that I'm very good at identifying problems, as long as you don't ask me to solve them. I like someone else to do that.) I had come up with such answers as hunger, alienation, sickness, double standard among races, the lack of freedom in so many parts of the world. My list went on an on. Up until just a few nights ago I had nothing written in the other column. I wasn't sure whether I should call Mu Guk Sunim [conference co-director] and say "I'm sorry, find someone else." Or, "Would you like me to just deal with the problems?" However, that seemed like a copout on my part, and then I began to do some self searching.

If my mother were here, she would tell you that I came into the world kicking and screaming (and she should know) and in one way or another since that time I guess I have been kicking and screaming about things which have bothered me. Through the years I discovered two things which perhaps belong in the column "solutions," although they are certainly not the full solution.

The first is that I have to recognize the fact that I don't have all the answers, and I



MILTON YOUNG, a long-term student of Sacha Sai Baba, is president of the Southern New England Foundation, a private foundation in Tiverton, RI, dedicated to promoting transpersonal growth.

Milton Young: Sai Baba's teaching is "love is the center of all human beings."

to Cambodia and to every corner of the world where there are Cambodians. Each step is a prayer, each step is a bridge. Our journey, our pilgrimage is one with all the world's religions and all religious leaders. We need your help in prayer and meditation so that the vibration of peace will go to Cambodia and to the whole world. We need your material and spiritual help also so that we may continue the journey with the Dharma of the Buddha for healing and peace. Thank you.

Sister Vilma Seelaus: The feeling of impasse which is so much a part of our world today—people feeling that they have come to a place in their lives where there's no way out and they feel imprisoned and hopeless—suggests to me that we are at a moment in our history which is like a global dark night. I feel that each of our respective religious traditions has something to say to this. Dark night is a symbol that is found in many of our religious traditions. For myself as a Carmelite, I believe that someone like John of the Cross, who has much to say to this concept of dark night in his own spiritual life and in the life of individuals, can be reinterpreted today to help people find new meaning in their experience. From hopelessness a new energy is created from within, and an ability to re-describe [one's] experience.

I am very involved in working towards a new hermanuetic of John of the Cross' mystical teaching in order that it may be more accessible to people today. In doing so, I have found that if persons are able to redescribe, or to understand in a deeper way what they are going through (that experience of hopelessness and impasse within

long history of animosity between Arabs and Jews and Christians, this is quite remarkable. I've also experienced that here in the United States, where ecumenical endeavor has been on the level of contemplative relatedness to one another rather than on the level of theological reflection (which is also necessary). I see these endeavors as networks of creating understanding, unity, and reconciliation. As these networks diffuse themselves throughout our world there will be a building of peace, a building of unity, a diffusion of love and creative energy, out of which we will find creative solutions for our problems of today.

Sharon Salzberg: As I was contemplating this question over the last several days, I had a fair amount of difficulty in trying to think of what to say. I went out to dinner the other night with some friends and I said, "Well, what do you think the problems are of the nuclear age and how do you think we might solve them?" I realized at that point that I was having so much difficulty that it was probably the case, as it has been many times, that I was asking myself the wrong questions.

I've tried to come up with the right question. I'm not sure that I have. I would like to invite your participation in helping me formulate what might be the right question.

It reminds me of the time when I had first returned from India where I did most of my intensive meditation practice, and I began travelling around the country, teaching intensive meditation retreats. Many people would come up to us and ask, "What could the situation be like in India for there to have been so many saints, the Buddha, so

I don't know if that's true, but it was an amazing experience to have a complete re-orientation around a problem or question. I felt a little bit like that in contemplating this question, that there was perhaps a completely different way of viewing it, more in the nature of "What is the essential thing I must learn from what is happening in my world and in the world around me? What is that crucial question or that one teaching that is possible for me here?"

I don't know but it has seemed very important to me in the last several days to move more in that direction. Many times we've had the experience, probably all of us, of feeling stuck, caught and hopeless, of responding to a situation with a sense of horror and despair and resignation. It's creating that different relationship, asking those new questions, that sometimes opens up the possibility or sense of awakening that something is possible in this situation.

When we think about the kind of suffering that is potentially involved in a nuclear event, or exists each day in our lives in this day and age, it's what we would call really unbearable. It's beyond the boundary that we define as our ability to comprehend or experience or love or accept. My sense is that the answer has something to do with that, although I haven't quite yet formulated the question so it's difficult to move on to the answer. Except [I have the sense] that experiencing it perhaps not as a problem but as a tremendous challenge, the solution or resolution will be in the form of much greater acceptance and love and caring. Thank you.

Dr. Richard Brown: About 2½ weeks ago I sat down one evening to begin to do

should not be apologetic. Also, as a part of that recognition, the need and the discoveries that I have made when I have willingly admitted this weakness within me, I have begun to "practice the presence," what Dr. Howard Thurman spoke of so often in his lifetime as "practicing the presence," that which can only be found as we do the things that we were talking about this morning, as we discover that prayer and meditation is more than that which we do for 5 minutes once or twice a day, but something that becomes (the older we become) more and more a part of our life.

The solution is "practicing the presence," discovering that there are moments when one must say "God, I have done everything that I have done, I must place the situation and the problem in your keeping, yet I remain open to doors that you may open, to a word that you may speak directing me in a particular way."

The second thing, yet not the full solution, is that so often we are apt to talk about programs and needs and situations in a global way. I do not think that there is a thing that I myself can do about what's going on in the Middle East at the moment, but there is something I can do in the community where I live. In fact this is where I must relate to the problems of the world, I must bring the problem down to a size that I can handle. It may not make headlines, and it certainly will not be the solution to the global situation, yet who is to say how important it could be to address oneself to just a small segment of that problem?

I'm thinking in terms of Rhode Island itself. Over the last few years, we literally

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have become representatives of the world. The Hmong, the Cambodian, the Thai, the Vietnamese, the Spanish from all parts of the world, Central and South American, the Irish, the Italian: you name the country and Rhode Island has them. They are part of our blessing and part of our problems, and these issues need to be addressed. As a Rhode Islander perhaps my solution is not to drive myself to an early grave trying to figure out what should be happening in Lebanon, but to be concerned about what's happening here.

Dr. Joan Halifax: This has been an exciting assignment because in considering the problems of the nuclear age one immediately turns to one's training in Buddhism and says, "The problems are desire, aversion, ignorance, pride and jealousy." Much can be said about these problems, which have plagued human kind since we awakened from our so-called animal nature. They are very profound problems. Practice, and everything that we do to awaken from these poisons, is the subject of this gathered-together circle. There's another subject, and that is war and warriorship.

It's very interesting to go back to the origins of things in our own language. The word war comes from an old English word which means confusion, interestingly enough. (As an anthropologist I'm one who looks at metaphor and reversals.) If we look at spiritual traditions across the world from old "high" cultures and primitive cultures we come to a very interesting conclusion, that the role of the spiritual warrior is very important in many spiritual traditions. That has been an area of subject, object, and practice for me for some years now: the awakening from this dream through the practice of warriorship, understanding and overcoming confusion about where the true battleground is, and understanding indeed who the true enemies are.

I would like to give you a brief teaching from the Native American world with regard to the four enemies of the warrior. Whether or not one aspires to be a sacred warrior, one who cuts or wants to cut through the knot of confusion, we recognize in some place inside of us that the worst has already happened, so we must attend to this process of understanding.

"It is through understanding fear that humility is able to arise."

Dr. Joan Halifax

Who are our enemies, what are they, and how do we work with them? Do we conquer them, or do we transform them into allies? Do we take these poisons which afflict our nature and transmute them into nectar? Do we take these obstacles which make movement in our life impossible and keep them as obstacles? Or do we change these obstacles into gateways?

Very briefly I want to give you the four enemies of the warrior, on the medicine wheel, and talk about the four qualities which arise when these enemies are transformed into allies.

The first enemy of the warrior is fear—in the south of the medicine wheel. It arises in the place of our emotions because our past, our karma, has made it impossible for us to be clear about the known and the unknown. Our cultural and psychological conditioning has clouded our vision, and we are constricted and fearful. When we transform the enemy of fear into an ally, a quality arises which we can call humility. It is through understanding fear that humility is able to arise.

Now let us journey to the north of the medicine wheel, to the place of the mind. Our enemy here is clarity. How can clarity be an enemy? Since most of us are from the West, it is one of our greatest enemies. Our mind-thinking prevents us from understanding how our very belief systems code our way of seeing the world, shape our way of being in the world, and ultimately shape the world.

By overcoming (or turning, if you will) the enemy of clarity into an ally, what you come to realize is that true clarity is an absence of any and all belief systems. When we come to this understanding, the quality that arises is the discipline of humor.

The third enemy of the warrior we find in the west, and that is death. The west is the place of the physical body. The medicine wheel is where we find the woman and the experience of change. It is inevitable for all those who have come into some quality of the spiritual life, no matter how we express that quality, that death has in one way or

another prodded us in this direction. When we transform death from an enemy into an ally, we come to understand the intention to honor everything, including the experience of death and suffering. As my mentor and teacher Joseph Campbell once said to me, "Death is the ornament of life."

We proceed now to the east of our medicine wheel, to the symbol of the sun, representing illumination, eternally awakened consciousness. What enemy dances in the east? It is power. When we, through practice and ceremonies, come to understand the enemy of power and transform this enemy into an ally, what quality arises? It is



photo by Adeline Alex

Nancy Brown, Shirley Lew and Mary Hardy at Providence Zen Center kitchen

the responsibility of harmony. All of us, in every act we perform, every thought that we think, every word that we utter—body speech and mind—is always in the direction of greater harmony.

In conclusion, I was given some words a few weeks ago. When I read them, tears came into my eyes, and I made a promise that I would read these words to as many people as I was able to. I think these words are particularly appropriate to this gather-

ing-together circle. The feeling of "What's the meaning of it all? What's the use?" is very much a part of people's lives. I believe it is also penetrating itself into relationships, in a lack of commitment to the efforts that go into building relationships. That's the one side of it.

On the other hand, the experience of a new energy, of a new life, is also a reality, and what the future holds as far as a balance is concerned, I don't know. I am convinced that all of our religious traditions are traditions of hope. I believe in mediating our own traditions to people's hopelessness. That's why I say that

understanding the meaning of the traditional can be very helpful to persons today who are experiencing hopelessness. Understanding that there is an inner movement of darkness, the underside of which can be creativity or light, a new birth can come out of this darkness, if the person is willing to stay with this darkness and come to understand the meaning of it in their own life.

Dr. Halifax: I imagine that at least one-half of the people in this room originally came here and into a spiritual environment precisely because they were without hope and were seeking meaning in their lives. It is typically the Western experience that salvation, a sacred view and a mythology which gives texture to that sacred view, has ceased to be apparent to us. We seek not only for a new Christianity, but also within other religious traditions, as a quest for meaning.

As an anthropologist when I look at my situation and those people like me who feel so hopeful, I look at their anomie, their sense of desperation and separation, and there's something in me that goes, "Maybe if they have one jot more [desperation] they will see the light, the true light, not the light of delusion." It is very exciting at this moment.

The warrior recognizes that the worst has already happened. Waking up to the warrior's job, to cut the knot of confusion, is a very critical moment of awakening... There's a lot to be said about hopelessness, and I myself honor it profoundly with the Western cultural experience.

"Anything the bomb can take away from us we shall lose to time."

Anonymous

but a material expression of our ways. It is already completely incarnate, while we in comparison are still divided. In the face of such an instrument, great listening is called for. Rather than strategic considerations, the bomb requires from us neither struggle nor resignation, but experience of ourselves. We are it."

Q. It seems as though a theme came out during our talks about hope and hopelessness. I wanted to ask whether you felt that in this country and throughout the world, this dread is causing numbness, or some sort of reawakening? Whether this force you see might form into some movement for change?

Sister Vilma: I believe that both are a reality. Hopelessness? We need only look at the high rate of suicide among the young—and the elderly. The feeling of impasse that I mentioned is an all-pervading one in many

Dr. Brown: It would be difficult in the light of my religious practice and understanding for me to disassociate prayer and meditation, and action and good works. One without the other leaves a great emptiness. I can only answer it in the light of how it happened to me, and that was in becoming aware of what I believe to be God's will for his world and all of his people: when I wrestle with such words as "To do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly," and the words "to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself." Then I ask the question, "Who is my neighbor? Where does he or she stand in need? What does it mean for me? Within the parameters that I move within the course of the day, what does it mean for me to live justly? Taking the great general statements and bringing them down to the most personal level, what do they mean, what are they saying to me?"

Q. I'd like to offer an observation. It seems that in many religions the world is transitory and imperfect. Jesus said, "Build your house on a rock and not on sand." There is renunciation, detachment from the mundane level, and hope for something eternal. Nuclear fear can be constructive, because just like the early Christians believed the world was going to end, perhaps it was a little bit easier for them to let go of house and wife and possessions. It appears that nuclear fear can be used the same way. My final observation is that the bomb does not threaten anything that is not threatened more severely by time. Anything the bomb can take away from us, we shall lose to time.

David Sullivan: I would like to ask Bishop George Hunt from the Episcopal diocese of Rhode Island, to lead us in a closing prayer.

Bishop Hunt: God, what would you have us call you? And for what would you have us pray? We thank you for new vision, for a vision of the possibility of peace. We thank you for kindling within us our sense of the possibility of hope. We thank you for awakening in us our non-violent natures. And perhaps we can but pray to know within ourselves that peace is not only our end, but our way. Amen.

David Sullivan: Thank you all. □



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Q. I'd like to hear what Maha Ghosananda has to say about the nature of hope, given the experience of the Cambodian people. So many of your countrymen and women have been slaughtered in this great tragedy, and yet you seem to move through this with hope. Often I've wondered, what is the source of your hopefulness? I think most of us would have given up long ago.

Maha Ghosananda: In the law of Buddha we always ask what is a cause and what is a condition. We neither blame ourselves nor other people. We try to discover the cause and condition of the problem, and we are free. The cause and condition of war is great desires, anger and ignorance. The cause and condition of peace is generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom.

Q. How can a spiritual practice and an active life be wed together?