

An Interview with Ajahn Jotipālo:

Meditation Leads to Experiential Understanding That What We Think of As Ourselves is Actually Stressful, Unstable & not Really Ourselves

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In the interview with Martin Dojčár, Ajahn Jotipālo discusses a set of issues concerning monastic life in the strict Thai forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism along with fundamental Buddhist spiritual practices and his views on interfaith dialogue based on his long-lasting engagement in it.

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Ajahn Jotipālo is a Buddhist monk of American origin ordained in Theravada tradition, who has been actively involved in Buddhist-Christian interfaith dialogue for many years. Jotipālo was staying in several monasteries of his tradition in Thailand, Canada and New Zealand; however, his home monastery remains Abhayagiri – a Buddhist Monastery of the Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah in Redwood Valley, California.

The following interview is a continuation of our conversations with Jotipālo on spirituality and dialogue that occurred at the Collegetown Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's University, MN, in fall 2018.



You have been a Buddhist monk for two decades now – since 1999. My first question concerns your vocation: What moved you to join the *Sangha* in the strictest monastic tradition of all, the Thai forest tradition of Theravada? I mean, you made a choice for a disciplined lifestyle based on 227 monastic rules (*vinaya*) of *Vinaya Pitaka* as opposed to the mainstream consumer lifestyle of the American culture with its emphasis on the values of individual success, wealth, and unlimited consumption. The two are in direct opposition: the former promotes detachment; the latter promotes attachment. It was not an easy decision, wasn't it?



First, thank you Martin for the opportunity to reflect on your interesting and insightful questions. It was a pleasure to meet you at the Collegetown Institute last year and I'm glad we are still in contact.

In some ways, it was just luck! I started asking questions about life after a near death experience while trekking in Nepal. It's a long story but in short, I got altitude illness and for about three days I knew I could die at any moment. On the last day of this ordeal, I came to a point where I knew I had the choice of life or death.

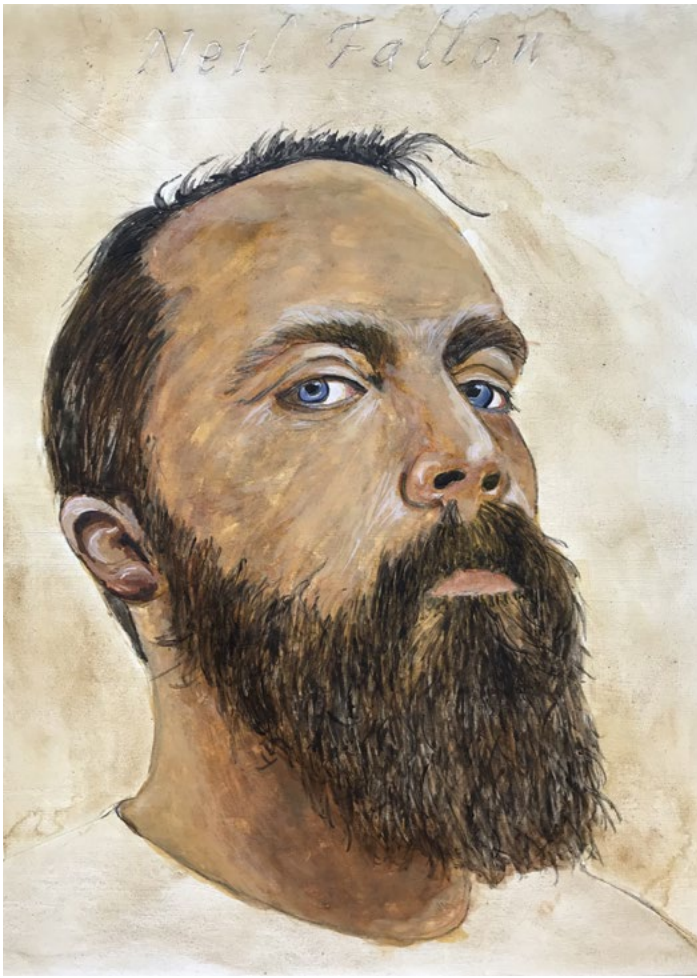


Ajahn Jotipālo is American Buddhist monk ordained in Theravada Thai forest tradition, who has been involved in Buddhist-Christian inter-religious dialogue for years. As a Buddhist artist Jotipālo also learns from Christian iconography, in particular icon writing. His email contact is jotipalo@abhayagiri.org.

About the author



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Portrait of Neil Fallon

Here is the portrait that only took two hours to paint: One of the potters at Saint John's Pottery asked Jotipālo to paint this as Neil Fallon is his favorite musician.

At that moment, I felt I needed to ask forgiveness from my parents and thus, I was not ready to die. The pain was unbelievable, so I asked to be separated from the pain and I came out of my body. *This experience gave me a strong conviction that something happens to us after the body dies, that there is a continuation. If this is the case, that means everything we do in life has consequences, and I wanted to start living a life based on that understanding.*

It took about five years of reading and studying before I found my first teachers. I started attending day-long meditation retreats with a Zen group and also got interested in Yoga. I eventually quit my job and moved into a large ashram in Massachusetts. It was here that my roommate was a passionate follower of S. N. Goenka. Something happened to me while sitting my first ten-day retreat and I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to a more formal meditation practice.

Being a monastic is not always easy and there are many frustrations along the way, but the same is true for lay life. I guess, at some level, I wasn't looking for the most comfortable path. I was initially looking for a path, where I felt those around me were benefiting and give me confidence to try it out. Fortunately, I noticed the results in myself, and thus was able to continue with the support of Sangha.

Q **We all need to constantly renew our motivation in order to persevere in what we have chosen. What are the main sources of inspiration for you and what keeps your motivation alive: inspiring individuals, teachings, intensified practices...?**

A *Contemplation of death is probably the most effective motivation tool that I use.* It was the fundamental reason I started on this path and it is a reflection that the Buddha encourages us to reflect on daily. When we use this reflection, it eventually dawns on us that not only am I going to die, but so is everybody I know and love, and all beings everywhere. This reflection helps me to "not take things so seriously". It allows me to hold my views and opinions more lightly, and thus reduces my anxiety and stress.

I also have been fortunate to be around several good monastic communities that inspire confidence. My primary teachers Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro have also been great sources of inspiration. I can think of many examples of how their teachings or actions have influenced how I see the world.

There is a strong emphasis on meditation in Buddhism. In Western societies, we have also been facing growing interest in meditation in recent decades. However, various people approach meditation from various perspectives and with various intentions. What's the purpose of meditation and its place in the whole of human life according to your understanding?

In a nut shell, to me, meditation is about understanding our minds. Learning how we create our own suffering, and how we can stop suffering. My teachers focus on *mindfulness of breathing and of the body*. These practices allow me to calm down and become present for what is happening in both my body and mind.

Initially, I used a practice of investigating the *Five Khandhas* or *Aggregates of Clinging* (body, feelings, perceptions, mental activity and consciousness). I would tune into one of these aspects of my experience and watch how they changed and were never stable. *Over time this leads to an experiential understanding that what we think of as ourselves is actually stressful, unstable, and not really ourselves* (Pa. *dukkha, anicca, anattā*). And once we start to get a perception of this, it allows us to stop clinging to views and opinions and allows the mind to question our experience. I often hear myself questioning my own assumptions, *“Is that really true? Do you think you will believe that next year? Might I not have all the information needed to make a judgement?”*

Another important practice has been the *Brahmavihārās* (good will, compassion, joy at other's good fortune, and equanimity). I see this practice as a way to help fundamentally change my world view. I used to be a fairly angry person and wasn't shy about telling people if they were not living up to my expectations – ha! The way these practices work for

me, is that *I will consciously invoke memories of when I felt one of these emotions. Then I will let that memory saturate my entire body and mind. Afterwards I watch and study how that emotion feels in the body.* With practice, and in most situations, you can actually consciously bring up one of these positive emotions. The more you “hang out” in these states of mind, the more likely it is that this will become your default emotion and the way you can interact with your life.

In the monastic tradition I was ordained into, meditation is very important – we meditate as a group usually for two hours a day, and are encouraged to develop our own sitting and walking practice at our private dwelling places. But a significant amount of time during the day, even while doing more intensive practice periods, is spent in “non-meditation”. So, our teachers spend a lot of time talking about developing *continual mindfulness practice*.

The previous question can also be recontextualized in regard to the human psychosomatic structure. In contrast to certain interpretations, where meditation appears as a kind of mental activity, in Buddhism, as well as in the majority of Yoga traditions, meditation is approached on the background of psychosomatic unity of human – in concerns both body and mind. Actually, the two are inseparable and mutually interconnected.

The idea can be demonstrated on all fundamental meditation practices of the Theravada tradition – on the *contemplation of the Three Characteristics of Existence* (impermanence, suffering, egolessness, i.e. Pa. *anicca, dukkha, anattā*), the *contemplation of the Four Elements* (earth, water, fire, air), the *contemplation of the Five Aggregates of Clinging* (Sa. *skandhas*, Pa. *khandhas*), i.e. factors that constitute our individuality (form, i.e. Sa. *rūpa*; feeling, i.e. Sa. *vedanā*; discrimination, i.e. Sa. *saññā*; formations of will, i.e. Sa. *samskāra*; consciousness, i.e. Sa. *vijñāna*), as well as the practice of four *Brahmavihārās* (good will, compassion, joy, equanimity) as you eloquently described it. However, if meditation is primarily not aimed at providing an individual with particular benefits in accor-

dance with one's taste, and at the same time, it cannot be limited to a set of techniques applied only in privileged moments of a day, then how is it related to that wholeness of human life? In other words, how can we keep mindfulness in daily life and make it a lifestyle rather than a technique? Or more precisely: What is the connection between the formal and informal practice from your point of view?

A Your question, "How can we keep mindfulness in daily life and make it a lifestyle rather than a technique?", that's a good question. If you find the answer, please let me know!

We call meditation "a practice", and there is good reason for that. I think, we all approach practices with a limited understanding of how practices work, how our own minds work, or really what we need to know so that we can stop suffering. The teachers I have studied with, encourage us to investigate, experiment and to a certain extent "play around with" various techniques and practices. But we always need to be truthful about the results we are getting from those experiments. My primary teacher, when somebody asks him, how they should practice with a particular technique, usually answers, "Give it a try and pay attention to the results." "Paying attention to the results" gives us opportunities to make adjustments, for self-knowledge to arise, for a real understanding of what works for us (not just following somebody else's instructions).

It is in this way that the *mindfulness practice* takes hold, as we need to pay attention to how our practices effect every aspect of our lives. It can almost become a game, or we become detectives spying on our minds.

Q **There are several points of intersection between Buddhism and classical Yoga (unlike the so-called *postural yoga* and other non-traditional practices presented as yogic by their promoters). *Dhyāna* is one of them. In the classical Yoga-darsana of Patañjali, *dhyāna* is the seventh stage or *anga* of Yoga. The Chinese *Chan* or *Chana*, and Japanese *Zen* or *Zenna* – concepts central for the Chan or Zen branches of Buddhism come from the same Sanskrit root**

as *dhyāna*. Following the doctrine of *Pāli Canon (Sutta Pitaka)*, Theravada tradition distinguishes between the four *rūpa dhyānas* (Pa. *jhāna*).

The very principle of the Yoga-darsana is defined in *Yoga Sutras* of Patañjali as "*Yoga is the inhibition of the fluctuations of consciousness/mind*" (Sa. "*yogaś-citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*"; I.2), and "[t]hen the Seer is recognized as such" (Sa. "*tadā-draṣṭuḥ-svarūpe-vasthānam*"; I.3).

By the means of virtue and concentration discontinuity of conscious acts, as well as dim consciousness are eliminated, and permanent continuity of consciousness along with integration of all cognitive acts with/in consciousness is established. In Buddhism, concentration on breath (Pa. *ānāpānasati*; Sa. *ānāpānasmṛti*) is considered to be the basic method of concentration. By anchoring the attention on breath, one is gradually becoming aware of one's own psycho-mental processes and contents manifested in the fluctuation of thoughts, psycho-mental states, and finally psycho-mental patterns as impermanent, i.e. as appearing and disappearing. Later on, other methods and techniques may come into play. Is this the reason mindfulness is so stressed by many Buddhist teachers nowadays?

A One of my favorite teachings is the *Seven Factors of Awakening*. The classical approach starts with the development of *mindfulness*. One way I look at this is, at first, we try to be mindful, but we fail (and that is why we are paying attention to results). So, we ask, "*Why wasn't I able to be mindful?*" This question is the awaking of the second factor – *investigation*. By investigating "why", we might learn more about our habits and patterns, both positive and negative, which then allow us to approach *mindfulness* with more clarity, understanding and hopefully we are able get better results.

When we bring investigation into the practice, this naturally leads to more *energy* in the practice – more interest and more fun. This energy then leads to the arising of *joy*. At this point, there can be a tendency to turn our attention to the joy and stop doing the practices that lead to the arising of the joy (*mindfulness*,

investigation and energy). So, it's important to keep mindfulness during the entire practice.

It's good to study this joy and get to know what cause it to arise, and what sustains it (and its opposite). Once we get to know joy, what naturally arises is *tranquility* (both of body and mind). With all of these factors, it is the previous factor that causes the arising of the next factor, but the next factor needs to be studied, cultivated and perfected, then that factor will automatically cause the arising of the next factor.

It is only when our body and minds are calm and tranquil, what we can easily enter into states of concentration or one pointed awareness. Again, this state is not the goal but a state we need to investigate and understand. Once concentration has been developed, it naturally leads into equanimity.

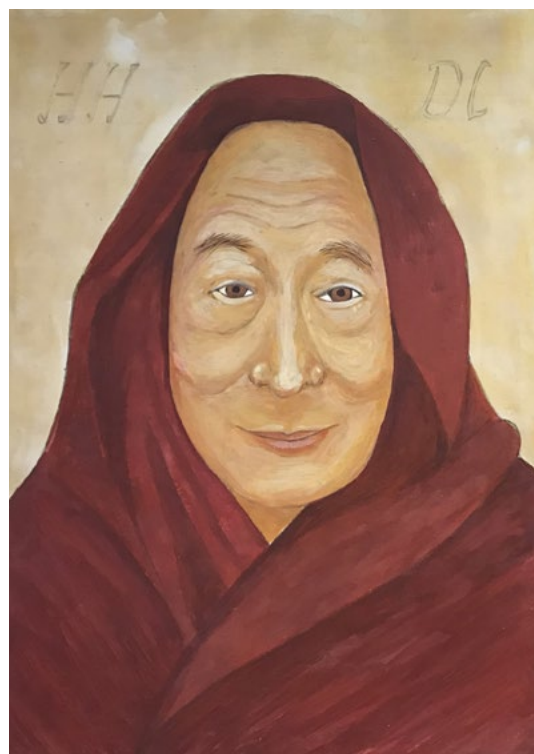
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In more traditional Buddhist doctrines, the stress on concentration and virtue is equally balanced: They both are considered preconditions of success in practice. Why is it important to develop concentration skills on the moral grounds?

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Yes, virtue (*Pa. Śīla*) is very important – practice can be very difficult without it! *My understanding is, that without having cultivated virtue, the mind will harbor thoughts of doubt, remorse, shame and guilt, which are hindrances to a concentrated mind.* I've also heard it said that a concentrated mind that is not freed of greed, hatred and delusion will result in super concentrated states of greed, hatred and delusion!

There are two mental qualities that the Buddha called *Guardians of the World*. They are in Pāli, *Hiri*, often translated as “shame to do wrong”, and *Ottappa*, “fear of consequences”. We often think of shame and fear as negative emotions, but in this case, you can see that there are actions, which undertaken can lead us in a bad direction, and we should develop a wise strategy to avoid following those inclination in our minds.



The Christ Pantocrator & HH the Dalai Lama

The Christ Pantocrator of St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai is the earliest known version of the Pantocrator type. HH the Dalai Lama appeared on Time Magazine's cover just as Jotipālo was working on the Pantocrator, and he immediately realized how his face was similarly non-symmetrical, so decided to paint these icons as a pair.



A Firefighter with Saint Benedict as Protector

Jotipālo made a series of paintings using firefighters as the theme not only as a way of honoring their hard work but also as a way to heal from his experience of big fires in California during the last years. These two images he eventually framed as a diptych and gave it to the Saint John's Fire Department.

As a natural result of practicing *Śīla* and developing the *Guardians of the World*, the potential for developing concentration practices will be greatly improved.



Throughout the academic year of 2018/2019, you were a resident scholar at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's University, MN. On that occasion, you were in touch with Benedictines of Saint John's Abbey on a daily basis. Have you noticed any similarities between the Theravada and Benedictine monastic lifestyles despite all obvious differences in their specific cultural and religious settings?



As you mention, there are many differences between Christian and Buddhist monastics, and we perform very different roles to our lay communities. Despite the differences, it was easy for me to fit into the Saint John's community and I felt 100 % welcomed and supported. One of the focuses in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is welcoming guests, and I saw examples of this displayed all the time. Right before I moved into the Collegeville Institute, I met with Abbot John Klassen, and we asked him where I should sit in the church. He responded, "*With the monks of course, unless he doesn't want to.*" Well, it wasn't obvious to me that is where I should sit, but it felt nice to be so open-heartedly welcomed.

When you have any intentional community, it probably will be organized in a similar way, like some people need to be in leadership roles, some people who have practical skills tend to look after maintenance, cooking, taking care of guests, teaching new community members... *Some of the "religious" aspects of our communities' intentions were also similar.* Both place a high standard on working things out in communal harmony, having group prayer and group meals, as well as some social activities. Also being in a community where the individuals who live there have asked to be part of that community is important too. Being around *people who are seriously dedicating their lives to a cause bigger than their individual needs and wants is also a significant similarity between our communities.*

Q At the Collegeville Institute, you were working on your project “What can Buddhist artistic traditions learn from Christian Iconography”. As far as I know, developing your painting technique was one of its aims, but not the only one. What is the main outcome of your almost a yearlong inquiry?

A Okay, now you are asking me questions about my true passions! Ha. Yes, a significant part of the program was for me to explore what would happen if I had the majority of my day available just to focus on creating icons.

At the monastery in California, I had many duties and the monastic schedule made it difficult to find time to keep up a daily practice of writing icons.

Being able to have more space in the day made for a much more even flow of energy. I didn't get as concentrated as I did when I had only a few hours, but the even flow of energy seemed to be more calming and relaxing in general. The number of hours dedicated to writing almost tripled in any given day, and as a result, I went from writing an icon in about two weeks to be able to complete one in a day. Actually, at the very end it took me only two hours to complete a couple of portraits. So, there was a greatly improved sense of comfort with the technique. I could also see a bit of my own style starting to emerge.

One of the bigger questions I was asking before the program started was, “*Is there a way to write a Buddhist icon, so that anybody looking at it can tell the intention of the artist?*” It seems to me now that this is not possible, as painting an icon is called writing because we are dealing with a visual language. And just as I can't appreciate say French poetry since I don't speak French, unless we take the time to understand the language of various religious art techniques, the real meaning behind the works will be lost. At first this kind of saddened me but I realize my first Christian Icon teacher, Fr. Damian Higgins of Mount Tabor Monastery in Redwood Valley, CA, partly uses his icons as a way to talk about his faith. In this way, I can

see that continuing to develop my icons skills could have some benefit.

Having the year to explore icon writing as a meditation technique has given me the incentive to go a bit deeper. I hope to start creating icons from scratch (not just copying existing icons), and hopefully someday get to a point where I might be able to lead workshops on creating religious art.

Another aspect of my trying to develop my own style of writing Buddhist icons by using an ancient Christian technique is to show that people from different faiths and backgrounds can learn from each other.

Q This reminds me, you mentioned you might be doing an interfaith walk with one of the monks from Collegeville, is that correct? What is your intention behind that?

A Father Michael Peterson, monk of Saint John's Abbey, and myself have one monastic camping trip planned for June 2020. We are also looking at the possibility of doing a longer hike in 2021. The camping trip in 2020 will hopefully be two Christian and two Buddhist monks camping together just outside Yosemite National Park for a week. All the monks have participated in monastic dialogue before, and I see this as a way for us to get to know each other in a setting outside of a conference or being a guest at a monastery. I made the joke a few years ago that if we really want to get to know each other, we shouldn't be meeting for conferences, we should go hiking and call it “Monks in the Mountains”.

I've invited Fr. Michael to accompany me on a three- or four-month hike in 2021, doing a large section of the Pacific Crest Trail. I hope that we would create a YouTube channel and post about our walk. The idea is that *I would be reading the Rule of Saint Benedict or some Christian teachings that Fr. Michael suggests, while he, on the contrary, would be studying my monastic rules and reading some talks from my teachers. Afterwards, in the evenings we could have discussions, sharing, and hopefully capture some of the better insights we get from our discussions on*

tape. I would see the focus would be on what I'm learning about myself, or about my monastic tradition from opening up to the wisdom of a different faith. I think the world needs to see examples of this, and what is a better way than two people of different faiths doing something difficult like a 2000 km hike over an extended period of time?

It's easy to show respect and appreciation towards another over a short conference or meeting, but what happens over a four-month journey? Of course, a lot of factors will need to fall into place for us to be able to attempt such a hike, but nothing will happen if we don't start to dream about it now.

You have been involved in inter-religious dialogue with Christians, particularly Benedictines. As I know, there is a bond of friendship between you and Fr. William Skudlarek, Benedictine monk of Saint John's Abbey, MN, and Secretary General of the Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue (currently the leading institutional promoter of interfaith dialogue worldwide). It would be interesting to learn what is your take on interfaith dialogue and its perspective based on your own experience?

Father William has been a dear friend and a source of inspiration for me for a long time. I think we have known each other for almost fifteen years. Our initial introduction to each other was at Abhayagiri when a planning group for a future monastic dialogue was gathering at a nearby monastery and they came to Abhayagiri for a tour. My abbot had told this group that I was planning to do a pilgrimage walk, totally on faith (no money), starting near New Orleans, LA, and trying to walk to Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada (which is about 2,500 km). Fr. William was really intrigued by this and we started emailing each other. We had hoped that if we reached the state of Minnesota, Fr. William would join us, but due to health reason I had to stop the walk before we got to that point. After a few years I was able to regain my health and we did a 10-day, 160 km walk in northern Minnesota, which was a great experience.

Our friendship has stayed strong all these years partly because I get a sense, we are both inquisitive and our bond of inter-monastics dialogue is not based on wanting to change the other, but to better understand our own tradition. Seeing how other communities function, practice together, how we interact, deal with issues that arise, how we live the teachings that we profess... All these things and more give us insights into our own communities, and how we can become better community members within our own group.

I definitely see the world through a Buddhist perspective, and I allow that view to shape how I respond in my daily interactions. It is fun to see where I have differences with people, and to realize I don't need anybody else to see the world the way I do to feel secure. It's interesting to watch somebody who I have a lot of confidence in, and who I respect, but see them believe something that seems so alien to me. It gives me great confidence to not trust my own views and opinions, but also to know I don't need to throw out my views either. It's just the way it is.

Another aspect of inter-monastic dialogue is that we are actually fairly new at this, I'm not sure of the history, but world religions have not been talking to each other for so long. *I see our gatherings as a way of building trust and developing relationships.* When things do happen in the world, and where different communities need to help find solutions, hopefully some of the ground work has already been done. His Holiness the Dalai Lama often, when asked about how to resolve issues in the world, especially where violence is happening, will invariably say, something like, *"In these cases it is almost too late, we need to look for where these situations could flare-up in the future and start laying a foundation to prevent it from happening."* In the same way I hope that is one of ways that interfaith dialogue is providing benefit to the world.



And what about the intra-Buddhist dialogue? For the last couple of decades, there is growing ecumenical awareness among different Buddhist branches, doctrinal schools and monastic traditions. What is your take of that?



Very similar to how different religions have not really been in dialogue for long, it is also true that the different Buddhist traditions have not really met each other until we all started showing up in the West. When I first got interested in Buddhism, I would often hear people talk negative about “other” traditions, kind of like, “*Our team is the best and you better not trust that team...*” Maybe that kind of talk still happens and maybe I’ve learned to associate with people who don’t think that way?

Personally, I have only attended one or two Buddhist monastic meetings – there is only limited time and energy available to us. But other members of my community have taken the opportunity to learn from and share what we find valuable to other monastics trying to figure out how to be nuns or monks in the West.

This sharing is important as what we are doing is very alien to the West. There are many practical issues where we might be able to act together to form a coalition – like around health care, nursing homes for elder monastics, issues with regards to Visa and Work Permits, etc.

At a deeper level, when we learn more about different Buddhist traditions, we can see clearly that we all have the same Buddha as our teacher, and many of the differences that have developed over the centuries could have been caused by culture. *Seeing where we have similarities or understand why a different tradition does something differently also helps us to appreciate each other and also deepen our faith and understanding of our own teachings.*

Thank you very much for sharing your insights with us!



Our Lady of Guadalupe

The Virgin of Guadalupe is considered the Patroness of Mexico and the Continental Americas. Replicas of the *tilma* can be found in thousands of churches throughout the world and numerous parishes bear Her name.