

Benedict's Dharma, edited by Patrick Henry with an afterword by David Steindl-Rast and a translation of the rule by Patrick Barry

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Monastics from diverse religious traditions the world over face similar opportunities, challenges and frustrations. Shortly before his death in 1968, Thomas Merton met the young Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, and the two monks quickly formed a close bond. In July 1996, the Dalai Lama met with some 50 Buddhist and Catholic leaders at Merton's monastery, Gethsemani Abbey near Louisville, Kentucky, for a week of reflection on monastic life and values. When Catholic monks and nuns repeatedly referred to the rule of St. Benedict, some Buddhist participants became interested in learning more about it. Four of the Buddhists, Norman Fischer, Joseph Goldstein, Judith Simmer-Brown and Yifa, engaged in further reflection and dialogue on the rule, resulting in this engaging volume.

In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia quietly rejected the extraordinary ascetic feats of earlier Christian monastics in the Middle East and proposed a path of moderation and balance that resonates deeply with the Buddhist Middle Way. In time, Benedict's rule became the central form of Western Christian monasticism. The Buddhists, representing the Theravada, American Zen, Chinese and Tibetan traditions, respond to the wisdom of Benedict from their own experience of practice, meditation and monastic life.

In general, all four respond very positively to Benedict's structure and advice for monastic living, appreciating his warm concern for his followers and his recognition of the varying needs of individuals. There are, nonetheless, differences on such points as Benedict's stress on humility in the form of thinking less of oneself than of others. Goldstein demurs: "We need to be careful not to reinforce a sense of separate self by thoughts of self-debasement in the name of humility, but rather to

free the mind from any comparing thoughts at all."

Perhaps most significant is the interest of the Buddhists in traditional Christian spiritual wisdom. There has sometimes been an impression in interreligious discussions that Christians primarily can contribute insights on social justice and practical action while Buddhists can contribute their experience of meditation and monasticism. In this discussion Buddhists draw nourishment and guidance from a centuries-old tradition of Christian meditative prayer and monastic practice.