

Mentoring for Ministry in Buddhism

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A growing number of students who identify as Buddhist are enrolling in chaplaincy and divinity programs. These training programs often have their roots in Abrahamic traditions, and it may be beneficial for those who supervise Buddhist students to know something of how Buddhist identity is shaped. This article is co-written by Sensei Joshin Byrnes, a Zen priest and director of the Upaya Buddhist Chaplaincy Program, and two Buddhist chaplains who did their Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) residencies in different locations, one in North Carolina and one in Florida. We hope to answer the following questions: What can be assumed about a Buddhist student's general orientation to their own spirituality and to the practice of providing spiritual care? What does a supervisor-mentor need to know in order to support a Buddhist student in a non-Buddhist setting?

WHO IS THE BUDDHIST MINISTER/CHAPLAIN?

This article focuses on Western-convert Buddhists, not on students coming from Asian and homogeneous Buddhist cultures from birth. Convert Buddhists, by definition, have roots in the Abrahamic traditions of their childhood religions or, conversely, have had little or no religious formation. Convert Buddhists probably found their way to Buddhism after a search for an inclusive and palatable expression of their spiritual values, philosophies, and belief systems. It is likely that the inclusive and non-rejecting qualities of Buddhism, its mindfulness and compassion practices, and its nontheistic orientation are among the most appealing aspects to Westerners seeking a new spiritual and religious way forward.

Many Buddhist converts practice simultaneously practice in the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim traditions. Therefore, a supervisor-mentor of a Buddhist student should not assume that the student is practicing in only one spiritual stream. The student may embody an interesting and profoundly insightful form of Buddhism that is hybridized,

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braided, or “interspiritual.” It is common to find people who identify as a “Jew-Bu,” Zen Catholic, or Sufi-Buddhist. Catholic priests and nuns, as well as rabbis, have identified as Buddhist while simultaneously maintaining their other religious identity.

VARIETIES OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism, like many of the world’s religions, is not just one easily defined tradition. A variety of Buddhist “threads” have evolved over the millennia. One thread is the literally based tradition of Theravada Buddhism, which grounds itself in the canon of Buddhist scripture and monastic rules. The popular practices of insight meditation and loving-kindness come from the Theravada tradition. The Mahayana thread of Buddhism, which is also widely diverse, orients itself around the notion of the Bodhisattva—the generous being whose sole practice is to relieve the suffering of others. Zen and Tibetan Buddhism are in this thread. The Vajrayana thread of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism engages in exacting mind training using scripture and elaborate rituals, ceremonies, and liturgies. Within each of these threads there are numerous other branching streams. It is important to understand that a student who says they are Buddhist has a deeper identity within a specific stream of Buddhism.

The central reason for diversity in the Buddhist traditions and practices is its uncanny knack for interacting and blending with the many cultures that it encounters. Here in the West, the varied Buddhist lineages also meet. It is quite common to meet a Zen practitioner whose primary practice is in the Japanese Mahayana tradition of silent meditation but who also uses mantras or liturgical forms from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This hybrid Buddhist practice is particularly common in Buddhist chaplaincy training programs because students from different practice traditions cross-pollinate as they study, meditate, pray, and work together.

Finally, on the topic of religious hybridity we should mention the secular mindfulness movement. Many people fully embrace a secular approach to compassion training and mindfulness. These practices loosely organize around the mindfulness-based stress reduction trainings that have their roots in traditional Buddhist teachings but have let go of the scriptural, ritual, ethical, and aesthetic frameworks of Buddhist religion.

Don’t Be Afraid to Ask

Given the richness of Buddhist diversity, it is difficult to map what to expect when meeting a program participant who identifies as Buddhist. Therefore, the first task of any supervisor-mentor is to inquire deeply into the spiritual path and current expression of the Buddhist student. Their perspective on spirituality, ethics, life and death, the nature of change, and the nature of mind will form the ground of their ministry.² It is important

to appreciate that these perspectives have deep historical roots. It would be a mistake to interpret the Buddhist traditions, as they often are described in popular media, as developments from New Age spiritualities that sacrifice spiritual and intellectual rigor for popularity and commercial commodification.

What Can (Probably) Be Assumed?

The supervisor-mentor can assume that a Buddhist student has practiced meditation and study under the guidance of a teacher and/or with a practice community. However, the specific meditation techniques of each Buddhist tradition can be quite different from one another (e.g., open awareness, visualization, concentration practices, insight meditation). Most students in our own chaplain-training program at Upaya Zen Center come to it with an established meditation practice that is personally fulfilling.

A supervisor-mentor can assume that any student who has worked formally in a Buddhist training program will have an ethics framework rooted in the Buddhist precepts (which are essentially non-harming commitments).³ These precepts will guide a Buddhist student's ministry and social engagement. Note, however, that a practitioner from the Mahayana traditions, especially one steeped in Zen, would put an emphasis on situational ethics rather than an absolute morality. Situational ethics means that each situation is unique and that doing what is "right" in each situation requires a full assessment of the many factors at play. Part of skillful action is moral discernment.

While all conduct aims at the overall relief of suffering, Buddhist morality requires the cultivation of moral sensitivity through taking a wide perspective, deep inquiry, and listening deeply to oneself and others in each situation. Buddhist moral discernment acknowledges that there is rarely a complete remedy to any situation and that there is always some unpleasant residual in the system. This is particularly important to understand as the Buddhist student may internally process experiences somewhat differently than a student who comes out of a tradition of absolute morality (certain actions are right or wrong regardless of the context). A Buddhist ethical framework is grounded in the absolute vision of non-harming, but non-harming is not necessarily a black-and-white issue. A Buddhist student is likely to view an issue through multiple perspectives, viewpoints, dimensions, and lenses. This does not mean there is a moral wishy-washiness in Buddhist students but rather that they are trained to respond to the uniqueness of each and every situation and to carefully acknowledge and process the inevitable "moral remainder" to the outcome of every situation. Left unattended, this

²NOTES

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999) 10.

³ Hanh, *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching*, 10.

moral remainder can lead to burnout; therefore, it is important for the Buddhist student to reframe the suffering that remains as the next step on the path of understanding, realization of the teachings, and ever more skillful action.

Most Western Buddhist students, with the possible exception of those in the secular mindfulness movement, will be familiar with various types of prayer and ritual, although they might be uncomfortable using theistic language. While the Buddhist student may not personally ascribe to the notion of a divine outsider to whom one prays, they should be able to relate to the ways prayer is used in various chaplaincy settings. The role of ritual varies in Buddhist traditions, but generally speaking, rituals are used to cultivate and encourage beneficial aspects of heart and mind such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

In prayer and ritual, Buddhists put very little emphasis on the existence of a deity, at least not in the sense that someone from a mainstream Abrahamic tradition might conceptualize the Divine Being. However, a Buddhist student should learn how to integrate forms and ritual in ways that respond to the needs of the person served as well as the chaplain's own integrity. A Buddhist student should be able to relate to prayers of awe and wonder, prayers of contrition and forgiveness, prayers of petition, and prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude. Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara wrote that in Zen we offer prayer that is without separation from all that is interconnected and interdependent. "Prayer can be a thought, an intention, a concern of healing or gratitude or reverence, an articulating and sending"; it is "offering, supplicating, memorializing, blessing, using all ritualistic communications in our possession to express that which is not separate from us, that which we are."⁴

This is an excerpt from a CPE reflection:

I realized that I do not need to embrace the faith or spiritual practices of others as my own, but I do need to connect with those I serve in this hospital using the language that resonates with them. This calls me deeply to practice non-attachment to my view. It is necessary that I not project my own reactivity and preference onto another's spiritual approach and instead connect at a deep interpersonal level that allows compassion without separation to arise. (MMN)

A Buddhist student might need some assistance to confront and resolve any lingering barriers to engaging in ritual and prayer with those in need. That said, we suggest that the Buddhist student be given permission to not participate in forms of prayer within the training environment that they cannot participate in with integrity.

The Buddhist student should be willing to investigate uncomfortable states of mind as this is the nature of some meditation practices. They will likely have practices

⁴ Pat Enkyo O'Hara, "Prayer," *Tricycle Magazine*, Spring 2000, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/a-zen-teacher-sees-prayer-a-skillful-means-helps-us-pay-homage-which-larger-we/>.

that help them discern between the beneficial and harmful manifestations of those states. A supervisor-mentor could inquire about and encourage the student to rigorously explore in their practice issues related to self-care, addictive behaviors (including workaholic conduct), forms of pathological altruism, countertransference, silent by-standing, power abuse, spiritual bypassing, and more. Finally, the supervisor-mentor can support their Buddhist students by asking them to look deeply into the Buddhist teachings and to relate those teachings to their clinical work as chaplains or ministers.

Importantly, Buddhist practitioners recognize the value in taming or training the mind to be less reactive and to express equanimity. This means we actively acknowledge emotions and recognize them for what they are in order to clearly see the relevance or lack of relevance to our current situation. For example, the Buddhist student should notice patterns of reactivity and work to liberate themselves from option-limiting mental models and persistent habits of thinking, feeling, and perceiving that they have not reflected on.

It is important for supervisor-mentors to understand that the Buddhist student may have worked hard to cultivate a state of reflective awareness rather than emotional reactivity. For a Buddhist chaplain, being able to watch an emotion arise, recognize it for what it is, and set it aside without reaction is an incredibly valuable skill. Responding with understanding to a physician, patient, nurse, or emotionally distraught family member with an undisturbed and centered presence is vital to creating a pastoral presence that welcomes open and honest sharing. Encouragement to “get out of one’s head and into one’s heart” may, in subtle ways, devalue the Buddhist emphasis on equanimity by not acknowledging the difference between *feeling* anger and *expressing* anger. In Buddhist training, with greater realization, anger can be acknowledged and released by understanding the causes and conditions that led to it. Expression of anger should not be expected if, in fact, the anger no longer has relevance.

As described in this article, there is a broad range of beliefs and practices among Buddhists, so it is important to welcome the student to share their unique experience without assumptions or preconceived expectations. Asking your student how they define their Buddhist practice and understanding any intersection with another tradition (e.g., Christianity or Judaism) will enable you to mentor your student well and guide them into successful ministry.