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Buddhist Chaplaincy

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Introduction

Buddhist Chaplaincy is a relatively recent phenomenon, having first appeared in the USA and the UK in the 1980s. However, it is quickly growing in popularity and has increasing representation especially in the fields of the military, healthcare, and criminal justice. Particularly in the USA, training programs in Buddhist chaplaincy have begun to proliferate in response to demand. Buddhist chaplaincy is rooted in the fundamental compassionate motivation to alleviate suffering. This entry will briefly describe the origin of chaplaincy in Christianity and its emergence in Buddhist contexts. It will describe accreditation and training and the roles of contemporary Buddhist chaplains. Despite the recent increase of Buddhist chaplains and training programs, little has been written analytically about chaplaincy and the study of this field is in its nascent phases.

History

The concept and role of a chaplain is rooted in the Christian tradition. The word “chaplain” comes from medieval Latin *capella*, meaning “little cloak” and dates back to the Catholic Saint Martin of Tours in fourth-century France. A reluctant Roman soldier who wished, instead, to become a monk, St. Martin is known for his humility and compassion. This is exemplified in the account of him cutting his fine cloak in half with his sword in order to give it to a freezing beggar one winter night. Martin later had a vision of Christ wearing a half-cloak, which inspired him to leave the army and pursue a religious vocation. The half-cloak (*capella*) became a sacred relic, and priests appointed by royalty to guard this and other relics became known as *cappellani*, or chaplains. (Encyclopedia Britannica 2015) Since then the role of chaplain has evolved considerably. For many centuries chaplains were typically associated with royal courts in Europe, where they provided pastoral and spiritual care. With the rise of industrialization, urbanization, and secularization, the role of chaplains has evolved considerably, although scholarly studies of this history are scarce.

Modern Chaplains
Although royal chaplains still exist today, in its modern usage the word chaplain generally refers to a lay or ordained representative of a religious tradition attached to a (usually) secular institution, such as a school, hospital, prison, or military unit. These public institutions (theoretically at least) are governed by norms associated with political liberalism, such as tolerance, pluralism, and respect for diversity, and chaplaincy is expected to conform to these norms. Thus, although most chaplains in history have been representatives of the Christian faith, they now represent many other world faiths (Cadge 2012). Todd (2011) explains that three types of chaplaincy have evolved in response to this secular turn. The first is ecumenical chaplaincy, or the collaboration of different kinds of Christian chaplain. The second is multifaith chaplaincy, where representatives of different faiths provide chaplaincy services to people of their own faith tradition. The third is “generic chaplaincy” or “spiritual care,” where religious affiliation is de-emphasized and chaplains serve those of all faiths and no faith.

**Buddhist Chaplaincy**

The role of “Buddhist chaplain” seems to exist mainly in countries with significant Christian heritage where the “template” of chaplain already exists. Conversely, “Buddhist chaplains” so described are less commonly found in predominantly Buddhist countries, although a program training clinical Buddhist chaplains has been running in Taiwan since 2000 (Chen 2012). Buddhist chaplaincy tends to fall into the categories of multifaith chaplaincy and spiritual care chaplaincy. In the context of the military and criminal justice (e.g., prison) systems, chaplains tend to operate more in the “multifaith” category in that they are appointed to serve the needs of Buddhist practitioners in their institutions. Healthcare chaplains, on the other hand, seem to fit more into the “generic chaplaincy” model, serving those of any faith or none. Buddhist chaplaincy has become increasingly popular in the USA and the UK since the 1980s. In both countries, the first Buddhist chaplaincies appeared in the context of the prison system, with the creation of the Angulimala Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organization in the UK in 1985 and the Prison Dharma Network (now the Prison Mindfulness Institute) in the USA in 1989. Subsequently, on both sides of the Atlantic Buddhist chaplains have begun working in the military and in healthcare. The first Buddhist military chaplain (Lt. Jeanette Shin) in the USA was commissioned by the US Navy in 2004. In the UK, in 2005 four “world faith chaplains” were appointed to serve the armed forces – Buddhism was one of the faiths represented, along with Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam. None of them, though, are commissioned chaplains as these are currently drawn from the major Christian denominations only.

**Training and Accreditation**

Training and accreditation for being a chaplain varies according to the branch of chaplaincy (e.g., military, healthcare, etc.), the level of commitment (whether one is a volunteer or professional), and the country in question. Accreditation standards seem to be more rigorous and formulated in the USA, particularly in the context of healthcare. Most professional chaplaincy positions in the USA require board certification by the Association of Professional Chaplains. This requires graduate level (Master’s degree or equivalent) in religious studies or theology, endorsement by a recognized religious faith group, 2 years’ worth (1,600 h) of supervised training in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at an accredited site (such as a hospital), and 2,000 h of work experience as a chaplain. (Hickey 2012). In the UK, on the other hand, it is “desirable” but “not essential” to be an ordained minister in
one’s own denomination, and while “demonstrable pastoral experience” is essential, the extent and depth of this experience is not uniformly stipulated. In the USA, training courses specifically devoted to training Buddhist chaplains have been established. At the time of writing, seven US institutions offer curriculum in Buddhist spiritual care, ranging from introductory courses suitable for volunteer chaplaincy to more involved programs offering graduate-level training for professional chaplains (Sati Center for Buddhist Studies, Upaya Zen Center, New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care, Institute of Buddhist Studies, Harvard Divinity School, University of the West, Naropa University). The curricula vary but include training in sacred literature, ritual and liturgy, pastoral care and counseling, and formal spiritual practice. Since chaplains have traditionally been in the Christian tradition, it can be difficult to work out what counts as equivalency in terms of certification standards. For example, chaplains are typically expected to be ordained, different Buddhist schools and groups vary in their definitions of ordination, and this does not necessarily have to mean one has taken monastic vows (Power 2012). The Association of Professional Chaplains Board of Chaplaincy Certification (BCCI) has written a white paper on Theological Equivalency to address some of these issues. (BCCI, n.d.)

The Role of Buddhist Chaplains

There are many different accounts of what it means to be a Buddhist chaplain, but a common theme in most descriptions is helping others to cope with suffering. For example, Block defines the purpose of a Buddhist chaplain as being “to alleviate suffering in its many forms: physical pain, difficult emotions, and confusing or disturbing thoughts, more commonly known as agony, fear, anger, guilt, depression, loneliness, grief, and so on.” (Block 2012). There is less emphasis on intercession than there might be in theistic traditions and a strong emphasis on transformation through suffering: “As Buddhist chaplains, we do not serve as intermediaries or authorities per se, but as capable, steady companions who have investigated suffering through our own life experiences. So from our spiritual practice we lend patients our spirit and stability of mind for the possibility of their own healing, awakening and transformation.” (Block 2012).

Many Buddhist chaplaincy training programs include portions of training in methods and theory of contemporary Western psychology. Kinst 2012, for example, argues that in addition to sustained Buddhist practice, chaplains should develop basic counseling skills and understand basic concepts of Western psychology such as transference, counter transference, and the impact of trauma and depression. She also emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, interpersonal awareness, and self-care: “Undertaking an honest, kind, and intelligent investigation of characteristic personal and interpersonal patterns allow the training chaplain to develop a familiarity with his or her strengths, vulnerabilities and habitual tendencies, as well as an ability to track useful and distorting inner responses that may impact the care of the person in need” (Kinst 2012).

Many descriptions of Buddhist chaplaincy emphasize the importance of bearing witness to suffering and meeting it with compassionate presence. Some chaplaincy training programs also place an emphasis on challenging systemic and social injustices and thus frame themselves as a form of Engaged Buddhism. For example, the Upaya Zen Center Chaplaincy Training Program defines the intention of its training as: “to prepare people to have the skilful means to transform all forms of suffering, including suffering induced by structural violence” (Upaya Zen Center).

The St. Martin origin story of chaplaincy epitomizes these dimensions of modern Buddhist chaplaincy. For example, St. Martin’s compassion for the beggar demonstrates the importance of service and pastoral care. His ambivalence about being a soldier speaks to the relationship between
the secular and the spiritual that chaplains must navigate in their roles. The different manifestations of Buddhist chaplaincy can be framed with reference to the Buddhist notion of skilful means, adapting the message to suit the needs of those one is serving, but guided by the overall motivation to alleviate suffering.

Bibliography


Board of Chaplaincy Certification (BCCI). Equivalency issues for Buddhist candidates for board certification through the Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc. A white paper. http://bcciprofessionalchaplains.org/files/eq


Web Resources
Angulimala, Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy UK. http://angulimala.org.uk/

Buddhist Chaplaincy and Related Organizations.


Chaplaincy training programs in the US.


Naropa University Master of Divinity Chaplaincy Project. https://www.naropa.edu/academics/shis/grad/master-of-divinity/about/chaplaincy-project.php


Prison Mindfulness Institute, US. http://www.prisonmindfulness.org/

