

# Towards a Definition of Buddhist Chaplaincy <sup>1</sup>

by Jennifer Block

The seeds of Buddhist chaplaincy as a vocation begin with the Buddha. The three most common causes of people needing healthcare in our day—old age, sickness, and death—were the very same that inspired the Buddha to reach beyond the familiar into greater truth and happiness. In doing so, he eventually found a path to peace in the midst of all that is difficult, uncomfortable, and confounding. Reaching out to the men and women in his community who were seeking ways to alleviate their pain, the Buddha offered care through careful guidance and a myriad of teachings. In essence, the Buddha was a chaplain, or rather, Buddhist chaplains who comfort others are walking in the footsteps of the Buddha.

For 2,500 years, Buddhists have contemplated sickness, old age and death to find an end to suffering. Buddhist chaplains continue this practice in hospitals, hospices, prisons, and other facilities, helping people to reduce their pain and skillfully deal with what is happening to them, in the moment.

In a classically Buddhist sense, there is not a lot of emphasis on hope or intercession from an outside source or deity, but more on how to use one's intelligence and basic goodness to be skillful and more at ease right in the middle of what is difficult. Although there are denominations or currents in Buddhism that seek guidance from Lord Buddha, in the most classic rendition of Buddhist history, the Buddha did not teach for or against "the gods," but only that extreme attachment or aversion to them was problematic. So one is free to choose, and obliged to choose wisely.

Everyone needs encouragement, assistance, and direction on their life's journey; the role of a Buddhist chaplain is to accompany individuals as their awakening and freedom from suffering unfolds. This may mean simply being a good listener, or an encouraging companion, an intelligent guide, or a piercing truth-teller. Overall, the purpose of a Buddhist chaplain is 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.

All of the teachings of the Buddha can be summed up by the phrase: Nothing whatsoever should be clung to as "me" or "mine." Interventions of chaplains exist to serve this goal, to aid in this realization, by either describing the situation or providing a skillful means to perceive it. "To cling to nothing" is a guide to the proper relationship to experience, as well as a statement of the ways things are when the goal is reached. All difficult situations can be improved by applying intelligent perspective and loosening one's tight grasp on how things have always been, or should be right now. This means any of us can work internally with our suffering to change it for the better, even if what is happening outside of us does not change.

According to Buddhist tradition, in the latter part of the 6th century BCE, Siddhartha Gautama wandered through northern India. Local villagers became curious about his uniquely radiant character, and asked, "Are you a celestial being or a God? Are you a man?" To these questions he replied, "I am none of these. I am awake." He then became known as the Buddha, which literally means "the Awakened One." What does it mean to be awake? In the Buddhist tradition, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhist chaplaincy is in the formative stage as a modern-day discipline and profession at the intersection between Buddhism, chaplaincy and suffering, as Buddhist chaplains join chaplains from other faith traditions in institutional settings such as hospitals, hospices, and prisons. In this essay I propose, in broad brushstrokes, what it means to me to be a Buddhist chaplain.

taught that the answer to this question is found through deep insight into the interdependent nature of the world as we experience it. When we look at the world, we do not actually see things as they are, but rather through the lens of our individual hopes, fears, and dreams. The Buddha pointed to this lens as the root of suffering and taught that we each have the potential to awaken from what is imaginary to what is real.

The connecting theme of this approach as a chaplain is *the possibility of awakening*, as understood from Buddhist teaching. Our deepest desire is to have a sense of belonging, and when we are able to recognize ourselves in “others,” we can then care for them in a fundamentally different way. The function of the various approaches and interventions is to offer tools that will enable people to open their hearts and minds so that they may develop greater awareness of their *true nature*, and from that awakening, truly heal and transform.

Although the Buddha neither taught about higher powers, nor denied their existence, many Buddhists acknowledge a universal life force. Human beings are both unique selves and part of this great universal life force—but if we over-identify with who we are or what we believe, we suffer. Our tendency is to embrace one thing as right/pleasing, and its opposite as wrong/unsatisfactory. Making such dualistic distinctions is natural to the human mind, and it serves people on many practical levels. However, clinging or aversion toward dualistic categories causes more suffering than benefit. A middle path between dualistic opposites offers peace and freedom; the Buddha called this the *Middle Way*.

According to Buddhist teaching, suffering arises from our ignorance of interconnectedness and change, and our bondage to dualistic thinking. Every aspect of creation is a process of becoming, into new, transformed states. Things fall apart and come together, fall apart again and come together again. If we clearly and deeply see that all objects and mind states are impermanent and without selfhood, we see that there is nothing worth clinging to, and when we stop clinging to (or averting from) things as they are, we experience liberation from suffering. Our very perceptions can change and everything can appear in a new and fresh light, leading to a more wakeful and skillful way of life.

With time, reflection, and compassion, Buddhist chaplains help people realize that there is beauty and safety in change. We can learn to dwell peacefully in “things as they are” and develop an unconditional openness to whatever arises, is born, and/or dies—within the self, others, and all of creation. We become increasingly aware of our True Nature: wisdom and compassion. Realizing compassion and wisdom in our lives is awakening; a change of perception, like suddenly seeing a three-dimensional object, where previously one could only see it as flat. Wisdom means seeing creation and ourselves as they are through the practice of mindful, nonjudgmental attention to ordinary experience. Thich Nhat Hanh describes this wisdom as “awareness of the interbeing nature of all that one observes—seeing the one in the many, all the manifestations of birth and death, coming and going, and so on—without being caught in ignorance” (Nhat Hanh, 1998, p. 101). Compassion can be defined as liberation from the illusion of separateness. A heart can be broken open to compassion through suffering, as well as through love. One experiences compassion as a great affection for creation as manifest in the self, others, and the nonhuman world. This is experienced as an urge to embrace the world. Nhat Hanh claims, “with compassion in our heart, every thought, word, and deed can bring about a miracle” (p. 160). Compassion enhances our appreciation for things and assures us that we are embraced by a wider community, not forsaken as isolated individuals.

This healing process is not something mysterious. Awakening to our true nature is available anywhere and everywhere, at all times. It exists within all phenomena, right here and now. It is a matter of removing the layers of our own projections that obscure the pure vision of reality. However, to wake up is not necessarily easy. We must first realize that we are asleep. Next, we

need to identify what keeps us asleep, start to take it apart, and keep working at dismantling it until it no longer functions. The good news is that as soon as we make an effort to wake up, we begin to open up to how things actually are. We experience what we have suppressed or avoided and what we have ignored or overlooked.

Over time, one can develop an unconditional openness to whatever happens, arises, is born, and/or dies within oneself, others, and all of life. Buddhist chaplains are motivated by loving kindness, an opening of the heart through spiritual practice, and are characterized by love for, compassion towards, equanimity amongst, and sympathetic joy for others. 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 learn to lend patients our spirit and stability of mind for the possibility for their own healing, awakening and transformation. Specifically, spiritual support from a Buddhist perspective can be defined as:

- Willingness to bear witness
- Willingness to help others discover their own truth
- Willingness to sit and listen to stories that have meaning and value
- Helping another to face life directly
- Welcoming paradox & ambiguity into care—and trusting that these will emerge into some degree of awakening
- Creating opportunities for the people to awaken to their True Nature

As a Buddhist chaplain, I serve others in realizing that most of life's events are not solely within human control, but are within the control of something greater than ourselves. Simple yet profound, life-changing universal truths are discovered or remembered to help people experience the deepest, authentic peace and satisfaction—a heart and mind relaxed and open to what is. Buddhist spiritual care means helping people access the stillness, clarity and love existing within our hearts. I have a sense of accomplishment or success when a patient begins letting there be room for all of everything to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy. Gone is the sense of separation, of internal nothingness, or of not being quite present. This is what I call the mystery of spirituality and healing.

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Nhat Hanh, T. (1998). *The heart of the Buddha's teachings*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.