Consider: you are admitted to the hospital for surgery; you've settled into your room; the mattress has a rubber covering over it for easy cleaning, and it squeaks when you move. The air carries unpleasant odors. The unfamiliar and institutional setting has you feeling a little anxious. A stranger knocks on the door and introduces himself as the chaplain ... and you think ... what does he know that I don't?

Consider: you, the chaplain, have been welcomed into a hospice patient's home and the family introduces you as "the Pastor"; perhaps you hesitate just a wink with this introduction and a conversation leads to the question of whether you, the chaplain, "have accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?"
As Buddhists, how do we answer such questions? As a Buddhist, who happens to work as a chaplain, how do I respond? Many possibilities come to mind: first of all, many of us would simply dismiss such a question with the comment “Thanks, but I’m not Christian.” Secondly, as a chaplain, I have to answer honestly and at the same time try to engage beyond the potential religious roadblock. I see a continual dance, one that provides an opportunity to leap into the source of compassion and learn to swim in ambiguity.

The term “Buddhist Chaplaincy” could be an oxymoron. Buddhism is a non-theistic tradition, a pure science of mind. Chaplaincy is the clinical practice of ministry, generally understood as Christian. Most of us in the western Taraldthink of a chaplain as a minister, or priest, who performs specific rituals in dire circumstances. We imagine military chaplains on the battlefield administering Last Rites, or Emergency Room chaplains sent to meet a family with the dismal news of their loved one’s death. So how do Buddhism and Chaplaincy fit together in this culture? According to Webster’s New World Dictionary, a chaplain is “a clergyman serving in a religious capacity with the armed forces, in a prison, hospital etc.” The current face of Chaplaincy challenges the common understanding by introducing the clergy of an increasingly diverse vol0ld.

Buddhist Chaplaincy is a good case in point. This meeting between diverse spiritual traditions is a dynamic one and has the potential for creating powerful alliances between practitioners of different faiths. For the purpose of this discussion, I am limiting my comments to the faith traditions with which I have some familiarity and contact, i.e. Buddhism and Christianity, although the points I’m raising also apply in a much broader context.

A chaplain is a spiritual caregiver, and the practice of a chaplain in my experience is to embrace ambiguity, or groundlessness. This is something that we as Buddhists understand through our experience with the discipline of meditation. In meditation we are instructed to enter into this groundless experience of “nowness” and let go. With letting go comes openness, and with openness we connect genuinely, intimately, with the present moment. In this work of Chaplaincy, that means connecting with other people. When this happens in the context of crisis and perhaps impending death, the experience is transformative. It transforms the experience of fear into workable fear, it transforms the experience of isolation into being welcomed into “community,” and it represents the living expression of forgiveness. All of these are basic spiritual needs, and they are magnified in times of crisis and especially at the time of death. This discipline of Chaplaincy provides opportunities to integrate our practices of mindfulness and awareness and puts great emphasis on aspiration and application of bodhichitta.

As Buddhist students in the West, we are facing an important juncture. We must each face the situations of our birth, sickness, old age, and death; our traditions provide us with tools and resources to prepare us for these transitions. It is important for us also to consider the place of spiritual care in these crises; care that reminds us of and reinforces the training we received on our journey. Whether or not we as individuals have an interest in society and environment.
in professional Chaplaincy, as students of an emerging Western Buddhism we will want to develop programs for training ourselves to be sensitive and competent spiritual care-givers to our sanghas. While this is not a new concept, we have excellent resources for training guides in meditation, and the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to suffering's cessation; and we have tested their "truth" in the laboratory of our relationships. The three-yana journey, with the comprehensive resources of the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, stream and the immediate experience is one of turbulence; the image that comes to mind is of the tide as it's turning; the sea churns and is chaotic until there is enough momentum to restore harmony. In my experience as a chaplain, it has been very much like this. As a student of Buddhism, I have trained and now

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our own experience fosters in us the ability to guide each other, as sangha, along the path; there is much we can learn from the practice of Chaplaincy and much we can offer. In addition to transplanting the wisdom of our Buddhist traditions in Western soil, we will be enriched by befriending and engaging the tradition of Chaplaincy as it manifests in our current culture.

Transplantation suggests that we are making the tradition our own. We in the West are still in the early stages of this endeavor, though some of us have raised children into adulthood in the Buddhist communities we helped to found. We have seen the initial effect of that influence, in contrast to our own upbringing. We have begun to knead these teachings into our lives, relying upon hearing, contemplating and meditating as we meld conceptual understanding with our experience. Contemplating the three marks of existence—suffering, impermanence and egolessness—we have developed an appreciation for the four noble truths: provides us with gates to enter the path at the level of our inspiration; and following our teachers’ instructions, we have ripened in a gradual way. The Buddhist tradition and its treasury of skillful means continue to prepare us to face our own suffering, illness and death, with confidence. It also teaches us how to be present to others at those times. How can we make the resources of our tradition available for wider benefit? The practice of Chaplaincy is an interesting place to explore this question.

Western Buddhism is being built on the ground laid by theistic traditions. Most of us who are Buddhist students in the Americas and Europe spent our youth learning the specific religious teachings of our families and communities or were shaped by the implicit messages of the Judeo-Christian milieu in which we were raised. For us personally, our initial meeting with Buddhism could describe a parallel with the convergence of Buddhism and Chaplaincy. You have two cultures, two distinct systems of beliefs, coming into one work in the field of Chaplaincy. In training, the experience of tumult is present at each of the points where the traditions touch, for example learning to pray with Christian patients and families, officiating at memorials, or assisting a patient to reconcile with their faith as they approach death. Learning to be genuine in unfamiliar territory is frightening and is an emphasis of the Buddhist teaching; interestingly it is also the practice of Chaplaincy. For chaplains in this western culture this process is facilitated by a program called Clinical Pastoral Education, or "CPE".

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) is the training ground where "ministers" of various faith traditions learn to become Chaplains. A minister is trained in the specific theology of his or her denomination and is taught the skills of administering a church and tending its congregation. A minister will, of necessity, be limited in their view as they represent one faith, one denomination, one congregation. When ministers enter CPE, they go through the painstaking
process of exposing the “attitudes, values and assumptions” that create boundaries between them and others. These boundaries and biases are often the very same qualities that were encouraged as strengths in their denominational training. The point of this process is to bring about flexibility and openness in ministering beyond sectarian or even religious boundaries; the experience of it is, in Buddhist terms, groundless.

In order to do the work of spiritual care-giving, I was advised that it would be necessary to complete a one year CPE residency. When I entered CPE, I was seeking training so that I could pursue the work of spiritual care in hospice. I entered this training in a Catholic hospital; I was brimming with anxiety and hesitation. My early life experience with Catholicism stimulated images of a judgmental hierarchy, and my pride in the Buddhist teaching had me feeling aloof, wondering just what it was I was doing there. What I found, to my surprise, were people of different religious traditions offering comfort to people who were sick and dying, and at the same time exploring the biases that interfere with this. The CPE process was intensely introspective and required me to use the language of feelings. I struggled with the apparent contradictions: trusting feelings seemed contradictory to developing mindfulness and awareness; I was paranoid about developing greater ego clinging while leaning into my growing edge. I resisted. I also viscerally resisted the practice of prayer, which I found difficult to reconcile with the Buddhist view of non-theism. I was afraid to let go of the comfortable ground I had come to know as home-Buddhism. I was forced to examine my own “attitudes, values and assumptions”. As a result, I found that by giving into the process, the dharma was self-evident; it didn’t require “me” to maintain it. It was humorous to trip over this insight in a decidedly Christian context.

One of the primary skills of a chaplain is the ability to listen and be present. Being mindfully present and listening to what another person is saying has unexpected benefits. From the conventional point of view, the person who is speaking feels that they have been heard. I know this sounds obvious but I’ve found it to be quite a subtle point. The ability to listen beyond the confinement of our concepts enables us to be present to the spiritual need in the moment. Through a process of experience of acceptance, of maitri or loving-kindness; this in turn is the fulcrum for transformation.

Transformation can be understood as healing, blessing, release, or calmness. This process mirrors the practice of meditation. We cultivate awareness of mind and mental activities, training ourselves to look non-judgmentally at who we are in any moment. In meditation practice, many of us experience the persistence of thought and emotion, and until we develop maitri, we perceive this undercurrent as our enemy; we feel we can’t meditate because we’re thinking too much, with acceptance or maitri, we relax into the present nature of our mind and our struggle is transformed—at least momentarily!

Our Buddhist traditions possess an incredible wealth of knowledge and methods that can tangibly transform the suffering of ourselves and others. Many of these resources are specific to individual communities and so comprise a great variety. It will be the domain of these communities to identify the essential practices for spiritual care and then train students in their application. Of equal importance is developing a collegial network of communication between these communities. This could create cohesion between Buddhist traditions and be a great resource as we create programs to accomplish the training of ministers, or “priests”, of our traditions. As a student

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attentive inquiry and reflection one identifies the spiritual need of a patient, or fellow sangha member, and then provides an appropriate response. The outcome is generally a greater awareness of the source of this current suffering. By exploring this in a relationship that is open and non-judgmental, it often leads to an
Transplanting these teachings requires that we have a firm grip on the two containers of Tibetan Buddhism and Western Buddhism—the vessel of Tibetan Buddhism as the vessel that pours and the vessel of Western Buddhism as the vessel that receives, so that the transfer of wisdom can take place without spilling any of the precious contents.

Nitartha Institute presents a comprehensive curriculum providing students an opportunity to study the seminal texts of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions in a Western cultural setting and idiom. Nitartha Institute recently added a contemplative medical component to its curriculum. It seems crucial that this kind of opportunity expand so that the Eastern and Western cultural traditions can begin to merge and forge an appropriate container for Western Buddhism. These kinds of training are comparable to what ministers and priests of the Christian traditions receive, with an added emphasis in the Buddhist context on contemplation and meditation.

There are cultural and systemic challenges to entering this work as Buddhists. The Judeo-Christian religious traditions have developed extensive networks of training and supervision; numerous institutions offer the requisite Master of Divinity degree for Christian ministers. There are few where a student of Buddhism can earn the same degree within the Buddhist context of training. Further, to enter the work of a chaplain it is necessary to fulfill professional requirements, established and supervised by a national certifying organization, such as the Association of Professional Chaplains or APC. Requirements include a Masters of Divinity degree, ordination or endorsement by a faith community, and a one-year CPE residency. The Masters of Divinity is an academic theological degree; ordination is a process that requires further consideration and clarification in our western Buddhist traditions. Within Tibetan Buddhism, ordination is generally understood to signify entry into a monastic order. Within the Nalandabodhi sangha, The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche has worked closely with a small group of chaplains, exploring adaptations for empowering non-monastics as "ministers". I am aware that other Western Buddhist sanghas have also been exploring these issues for some time. Making these kinds of adaptations requires us to understand and respect the Vinaya teaching of the Buddha, the roots of ordination in Buddhism, to ensure that our developments are in keeping with this wisdom.

In closing, I would like to offer this verse by Yen. Khenchen Tsurtrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, who spoke this as an aspiration for our work with others:

May we live this life, and in all future lives to come
Have the heart of compassion and endeavor to benefit others.
May we never feel discouraged or downhearted for even a moment, And being skillful in means, may we help others greatly.

- Khenpo Tsurtrim Gyamtso Rinpoche 6-4-97
Translated by Ari Goldfield 0