An Invitation to Buddhist Chaplaincy Training

This essay is a synthesis of the perspectives and writings of Gil Fronsdal, Paul Haller, and Jennifer Block, whose collective vision and experience have helped shape the Sati Center's Introduction to Buddhist Chaplaincy Training program from its beginning in 2002.

The Sati Center's year-long Introduction to Buddhist Chaplaincy Training invites Buddhist practitioners to bring the wisdom and compassion of the Dharma into direct relationship with the joys and sorrows of human life.

Rooted in over 2,500 years of Buddhist teachings and practice, the program was created in response to a simple question: *How can we skillfully accompany others through illness, grief, aging, dying, and life's many transitions?* While Buddhist chaplaincy in North America first became established primarily in healthcare settings such as hospitals and hospices, and later expanded into correctional institutions and prisons, the field continues to evolve in response to the needs of society. Today, Buddhist chaplains also serve meditation communities, universities, neighborhoods, disaster response efforts, and community settings, offering compassionate presence wherever people gather in moments of suffering, conflict, celebration, or social change. Some chaplains accompany participants at public demonstrations and protests, offering a calm, non-anxious presence amid uncertainty and helping to foster resilience, dialogue, and nonviolence. The vocation of chaplaincy continues to grow beyond institutional walls, bringing Buddhist spiritual care into the wider community wherever it is needed.

At its heart, Buddhist chaplaincy is the practice of compassionate presence. It is learning how to listen deeply, bear witness to suffering, and accompany others without needing to fix or change their experience. Buddhist chaplains help create the conditions for healing, peace, and awakening—not by offering answers, but by cultivating wisdom, compassion, and skillful means.

This training is much more than an academic course of study. It is itself a form of Buddhist practice. Participants are invited to engage wholeheartedly in meditation, self-reflection, experiential learning, and community practice throughout the year. The program emphasizes both inner transformation and compassionate service, recognizing that caring for others and deepening one's own practice are inseparable.

The richness of the experience is closely related to the sincerity and depth of one's engagement. The training asks for curiosity, openness, and a willingness to explore both the teachings and one's own experience. Reading assignments, meditation practice, and reflective writing are integral parts of the learning process. While the writing assignments can feel challenging at first—particularly because they invite honest self-

reflection—they often become one of the most meaningful and transformative aspects of the program. Many participants discover that writing becomes a powerful vehicle for insight, helping them integrate Buddhist teachings with their lived experience and deepen their capacity for compassionate presence.

The curriculum is organized around the Ten Paramis, or Perfections, of the Buddhist tradition—qualities of heart and mind that support both liberation and compassionate action. Throughout the year, participants explore both the inner qualities that support compassionate presence and the practical skills of Buddhist spiritual care. Topics include:

- Hospital and hospice chaplaincy
- Illness, dying, death, grief, and loss
- Prison chaplaincy
- Community chaplaincy and compassionate public presence
- Spiritual assessment
- Resilience in spiritual care
- Spiritual formation
- Ethics in spiritual care
- Ritual and contemplative practices
- Multifaith chaplaincy
- Mindfulness and compassionate presence
- Self-reflection and transformative writing practices

A central understanding of Buddhist chaplaincy is that compassion and liberation go hand in hand. We learn not only to ask, *"What is the compassionate response?"* but also, *"Where is the invitation to awakening within this experience?"*

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 dies—within ourselves, others, and the world around us. Buddhist practice invites us to become increasingly aware of our true nature: wisdom and compassion.

Wisdom is cultivated through mindful, nonjudgmental attention to ordinary experience and through seeing our profound interconnectedness with all of life. Compassion may arise through suffering as well as through love. It is the liberation from the illusion of

separateness and the heartfelt impulse to embrace the world just as it is. Together, wisdom and compassion reveal the possibility of awakening in the midst of everyday life.

As Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, wisdom is "awareness of the interbeing nature of all that one observes," and "with compassion in our heart, every thought, word, and deed can bring about a miracle."

Buddhist spiritual care rests upon a profound trust that peace and healing are possible even when life does not unfold according to our wishes. Through Buddhist practice, we discover and remember simple yet life-changing truths that allow the heart and mind to relax into what is. Chaplaincy invites us to help others access the stillness, clarity, and love that already exist within them. Sometimes this means making room for grief. Sometimes it means making room for relief, joy, uncertainty, or sorrow. Often, healing begins when there is room for all of it. In these moments, the sense of separation softens, presence deepens, and something mysterious and beautiful becomes possible. This is the gift—and the mystery—of Buddhist spiritual care.

The Introduction to Buddhist Chaplaincy Training is for Buddhist practitioners who feel called to accompany others through the tender and difficult moments of being human. Many participants discover that chaplaincy becomes not simply something they do, but a way of meeting the world—with greater steadiness, openness, and care.

Ultimately, this program is an invitation to deepen your own practice while learning how to be of genuine benefit to others. If you feel called to turn toward suffering with kindness, curiosity, and compassion, we warmly invite you to join us.