

## The Approach of the Chaplaincy Training Course

by Paul Haller

The Chaplaincy Training we offer at the Sati Center is not simply a didactic transfer of information. We could have wired that to you via the Internet or sent you books to read. Our training (like every other part of our Buddhist tradition) is the enactment of what it is we are trying to communicate. Participating in the training is practice just as much as if we were going off to a retreat center to meditate, or do work practice or eating practice.

Think of it this way. When we come to class we come to be mindful, to be attentive to what goes on for us emotionally, to be open and receptive to the skills to be taught and to discover how to be present. We attempt to enter with the same courage, openness, kindness, inquisitiveness as we do in our own sitting meditation. These are also the same qualities we need to aspire to bring to any situation of suffering.

Each day-long class begins with meditation. Then, as the day unfolds, class participants will also bring forth elements often associated with formal practice. How we move around, how we sit, how we talk with each other: all will support the sense of the class being an occasion for practice. In this way learning is not simply a discursive or cognitive process. Something comes in through our body to present a deep learning.

The training also includes readings, writing assignments, and discussions with the teachers and fellow students. Again, all these activities should be approached as one would meditation practice. The more one immerses oneself with the material the more it becomes a transformative process.

The idea is not to come out of the program with a “certificate” like a Masters in Divinity, but rather to come out having connected with something within you on a cellular level, a heart level. Our intention with the program is that, through deepening both the discovery of oneself and participating in the program’s group process, the participants will learn how to better enter the world with helpfulness and kindness.

No didactic learning substitutes for an open presence, an open heart and a willingness to be totally present with the suffering that arises. This is the request of chaplaincy. Our normal human tendency is to move away from suffering and to search for happiness. The vow and intention of chaplaincy is to turn towards suffering and to be present in a supportive way. I personally think that the heart of Buddhist practice is extraordinarily well equipped to enable healing.

Prison chaplains, for example, don’t go into prison and take the prisoners out the prison gates with them. Chaplains go into the situation to teach that within conditioned existence there remains the possibility of liberation. We’re not going to change the conditions of prison. Instead, we will try to enable liberation. The intention and the activity of doing that are intrinsically compassionate.

Buddhist teachings talk about “purifying the mind,” meaning to make the mind whole. Like purifying gold: when it’s purified it becomes completely itself. The willingness to become present loses its ambivalence, hesitance, and distractedness. Throughout the year of chaplaincy training, we will explore how we can do this. How, in the midst of pleasant and unpleasant, do we sustain and enable an unambivalent

willingness to be present? How, in the midst of all the human responses (our own and each others'), do we sustain that? That is where our meditation practice comes in. We assume, therefore, that participants have an active and potent meditation practice. Sitting meditation draws to it stillness and mindfulness, that is, being present with the vibrant activity of each moment.

One of the great things about Buddhist practice is that it does not involve "good and bad." Instead, it is done within the context of everything that is already expressing itself. One of the things I've learned in hospice work is that everyone dies the way they die. Sometimes the process is truly a mystery. Someone will tell me of someone at the hospice who is becoming very peaceful, luminous and at ease. Our tendency is to think, "She's doing it right" or "That's the Buddhist way to die," and so it's wonderful to be around. It evokes pleasantness. But then when a dying person becomes frightened, resentful and bitter, angry and critical the tendency is to wonder, "What's the problem?" The deep wisdom of our practice is to hold them both. One may be pleasant to attend to and the other unpleasant. There's no denying that it's unpleasant when someone's critical of the care giver or that when someone is grateful it is pleasant.

I witnessed an example of going beyond "good and bad" once when I was visiting at Laguna Honda Hospital. In the AIDS ward that was a hospice ward, I was invited to attend the Monday morning meeting with the nurses and doctors. I remember the lead doctor standing up and saying, "You know that person who died on Wednesday? That was my fault! In the rush of the morning I chose this medical intervention and it proved to be incorrect."

While it was sad that person died a few days prematurely, I was most impressed by the doctor's commitment to honesty and disclosure. This is one way to the medical team could learn. The doctor wasn't confessing this to diminish herself or to make others feel bad; she was putting it out to learn from it. Such honesty can be corrosive unless it is completely supported with compassion.

In the course of the training year, class participants create an environment where honest self-disclosure and compassion support the learning environment. Learning is about giving time to a myriad of questions: should I simply let it go, should I go back; now what? How do we bring a learning attitude towards it? What is the compassionate response to everyone involved?

As we create a learning environment in the training program, there are three elements of compassion that chaplaincy work should keep close at hand. First is the sense of emptiness or formlessness out of which compassion flows. Second is the concrete expression of compassion in our relationships with others. And third is the expression of self-compassion in the form of self-reflection and learning.

These attributes of compassion enable chaplaincy and will support the training of Sati Center's program.