

Introduction to Chaplaincy Training Course

Overview by Gil Fronsdal

For people interested in offering Buddhist spiritual care the Sati Center is very happy to offer a year long training called *An Introduction to Buddhist Chaplaincy*. The seed for this program was my personal response to 9/11. As a director of the Sati Center I was moved by that tragedy to expand the Sati Center beyond its focus on scholarly and textual studies of Buddhism. My wish was to add to our curriculum classes and programs which would support Buddhist practitioners to respond more directly to the suffering of our world. In particular, I was interested in the kind of one-on-one work that is often associated with “chaplains,” i.e. people who offer spiritual care in hospitals, hospices, schools, and prisons as well as in times of great tragedy

At first the idea was relatively modest. The only Buddhist chaplain I knew at that time was Shannon Wakoh Hickey, a Buddhist priest working as a hospital chaplain. The Sati Center invited her to teach a daylong class, Introduction to Buddhist Chaplaincy. As the idea of the class developed, Paul Haller, abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, and Richard Shankman, a Buddhist chaplain in Soladad prison, were invited to help lead the day. When, we finally offered the class in June 2002, 50 to 60 people came, many more than we expected. The attendees were very enthusiastic about Buddhist chaplaincy. At the end of the day, we asked how many would like to be a part of a year-long program. A great majority of hands went up. I said it is one thing to raise a hand but another to be really serious about it. When I asked for a show of hands for those who were “serious” about participating in a year-long course, the same number of hands went up with great eagerness .

The next year was spent planning and designing the year-long Chaplaincy Training Program. When we started in September 2003, we had a wonderful faculty of Paul Haller, Jennifer Block, who was then Chaplaincy Supervisor at St. Mary’s Hospital in San Francisco, Diana Lion, who was the director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship’s prison projects, and myself.

Our program is not meant to be “professional”; one doesn’t graduate as a professional Buddhist Chaplain. However, most places that offer professional chaplaincy training have a Judeo/Christian orientation. Very few places provide Buddhist training, teaching and community for offering spiritual care either as a volunteer or a professional.

Chaplains and others who offer people spiritual care need to be well grounded in their own spiritual lives. For Buddhists this means having both a strong personal spiritual practice as well as a solid grounding in Buddhist teachings, stories, and history. In Judeo-Christian terms this is called grounding in Theology. For Buddhist we might call this “Buddhology” or “Dharmalogy.”

To provide a Buddhist context for chaplaincy, the year-long program is structured around the *paramis*, the Theravada Buddhist list of the ten perfections. In Sanskrit the equivalent word is *paramita*, though the traditional Mahayana ten perfections differs a little from the Theravada ones. Either list is helpful for supporting chaplaincy; both highlight the qualities of heart and mind that support and express compassion. In the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions, these qualities of character and inner strength must be present to some degree for anyone engaged in the Buddhist Path. It is not uncommon in Theravada countries, if one reaches an inner obstacle to spiritual growth, to be advised to develop one or more of the *paramis*.

The 10 Theravada Paramis are: generosity, virtue or ethics, renunciation (letting go), wisdom, strength (energy, perseverance), patience, truthfulness, resolve (determination), loving-kindness and equanimity. None of these is by itself a *parami*. Each becomes a *parami* when it is intimately tied to both compassion and liberation.

Liberation and compassion, like two hands washing each other, function together to develop us spiritually and to purify us. Compassion is concerned with the welfare of others; it includes empathy and a desire to free people from suffering. Liberation is concerned with the welfare of oneself; it is the process of freeing oneself from our own suffering by overcoming the forces of fear, greed, hate and delusion.

In the Sati Center chaplaincy program, we understand that Buddhist chaplain's work is informed equally by compassion and liberation. It is important not to choose one over the other. Buddhist chaplaincy is a response of compassionate concern. At the same time it is not self-sacrificing. The chaplain must not ignore his or her own welfare. Self-reflection and insight are needed so that the actions of the chaplain serve both others and oneself. The chaplain needs a strong commitment to be mindful and present for oneself, and the personal skills to handle one's own attachments and resistances.

The beauty of the *paramis* is that an individual's path to liberation is found through a compassionate response to others.. It is an integrated approach which is neither self-concerned or self-denying. The Buddhist chaplain tries to always ask him or herself simultaneously: What is the compassionate response? And, Where is my path to liberation in this care-giving experience?

The Buddhist practices of mindfulness, presence and mental stabilization tend to sensitize the heart. They open and cultivate love and compassion. Some people find that this motivates them to respond to the suffering of others. Others are already responding to suffering but feel the need for greater mindfulness and inner stability if they are to be engaged in spiritual care. Developing the *paramis* supports both of these conditions.

The curriculum of the year-long chaplaincy training program is organized by the ten *paramis*, constantly relating chaplaincy work back to the fundamental Buddhist principles of compassion and liberation. The emphasis on the *paramis* is intended to help develop the strengths of character of the Buddhist chaplain. Under the category of particular *parami* the program includes introductory training in such areas hospital and hospice chaplaincy, prison chaplaincy, the ethics of spiritual care, grief and critical incidence counseling, rituals, cultural competency, inter-faith chaplaincy, etc.

Through all these topics a pivotal issues is the understanding of compassion. In the early Buddhist Tradition compassion is assumed: anyone with a spiritual background would respond to suffering with kindness, care and compassion. In this early tradition there is no Dharmalogical reason why one should be compassionate. Teachings in Mahayana Buddhism will often bring emptiness, bodicitta and compassion together. Some of the most profound understandings and realizations of emptiness are inseparable from compassion. Somehow, in the midst of emptiness there is compassion. In the modern Buddhist world we tend to say that compassion is the natural response of an open heart. I believe that all these are saying that we can assume that compassion is part of the human heart. In three years of offering Chaplaincy Training Program we have been as very fortunate to have wonderful students who have brought their own warm and compassionate hearts to engage in the training.