

## Being Buddhist, Being Human

In order to become a Spiritual Care volunteer at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center (SCVMC), candidates must complete a seven-week training with the two chaplains there, consisting of a two-hour weekly class and homework in between. They seemed unusually enthusiastic about getting me into the class, and I soon found out why: The group consisted of eight Catholics and one Buddhist.

Each class began with the playing of a song called "This is Holy Ground," which praises the place we stand, and the hands we work with, as holy. Then we went over a packet of printed material with lessons about listening with the heart, responding as a spiritual caregiver, setting boundaries, respecting diversity, and handling our own "stuff" that will come up. We learned a "universal prayer" and how to offer it. For homework, we read articles, did exercises, and came up with a weekly set of reflections (three things we learned about spiritual care, and three things we learned about ourselves). Finally, we progressed to accomplishing three verbatims, two role-played and one "live."

One of these verbatims brought some resolution to a process that had unfolded over the seven weeks; it is described in its chronological position amidst my reflections about other changes throughout the course. Doing training class with my eight classmates deepened my understanding of how to "be Buddhist" in the largely Christian world of hospital chaplaincy, which touches into the larger Buddhist spiritual issue of identity.

### *Conceit and Separation*

When I found out that all my classmates were Catholic, I immediately felt some trepidation. Am I supposed to represent *all* of Buddhism? Are they secretly judging me as a heathen because I don't believe in their God? Will the class lessons all come from a theistic perspective? Will I be asked to explain or defend Buddhist ideas?

All machinations of the mind, of course. What I was feeling was separation and difference, as if I were one thing, and all the others were something else. This is the very definition of conceit, and there is no doubt that it is a cause of suffering. Over time, the tangle of thoughts that came from this reflexive reactivity clarified and loosened.

Many of my early ideas about the training included conceit – both that of superiority and inferiority. Regarding religion, I felt unqualified as a Buddhist representative – the Western Theravadan tradition has been deliberately stripped of religious elements, and devotional practices have been secondary for me. How could I stand amidst devout Catholics with the full weight of the Church behind them?

And yet, I simultaneously felt some superiority – why bother with all that ritual and belief in an external God, when the cause of suffering lies no farther than our own mind and its relation to the senses?

Some of our first lessons in class asked us to develop "self-awareness," including the ability to know what we are thinking and feeling during an interaction in order to have a choice about what to say and do. The language sounded like "mindfulness 101," and I was mindfully aware of feeling like I could skip

this lesson after a decade of mindfulness training. Another handout offered many options for self-care and stress relief, but made no mention of meditation. Again, I felt that I knew more (and better).

We were also asked to explore our personalities through the Enneagram. I find these sorts of tests intriguing for a while, but then at some point I rebel because they feel stereotyped and limiting. Having to write a weekly list of "three things I learned about myself" similarly pushed my buttons.

I also felt some confusion. The lyrics of "This is Holy Ground," which some of the Catholics sang along with, did not especially resonate for me. Was it OK not to sing? Or what if I *did* want to sing? Would it betray my Buddhist stance?

In summary, I arrived in a defensive posture of separation, which manifested both as anxiety about being the sole Buddhist and as a sense of superiority about mindfulness and not-self. I could generally see these difficulties when they arose, but they still brought some suffering.

Of course there were plenty of other emotions and expectations in play. I had moments of awe that this class could actually be happening for me. It is far beyond what I would have imagined, say, 10 or even five years ago. Truly, this path takes us into new territory! Kim in a religious training course?? The Sati program evokes the same thoughts sometimes, but it is different when everyone is Buddhist. At SCVMC, I was in a much larger arena.

I also felt all the same concerns that my classmates did about whether I could really offer spiritual care to someone in the hospital with a serious illness or major injury. What would it be like? How does one actually *do* this?

### *Growing Unity through Diversity*

I like to think of the Buddhist focus on suffering not as something depressing or even something designed to shock us into Awakening, but rather as a skillful means of unifying people. What do we all share, regardless of "belief"? Aging, illness, and death. A religion based on these (and on their cessation) is a unifying religion. Also in my experience, viewing suffering as a common human experience paradoxically allows all types of diversity and difference to emerge more clearly and in a clean, non-threatening way.

As I listened to my classmates sharing their experiences, insights, and concerns, I could feel the common humanity between us despite the lens of difference that initially clouded my mind. The group went through its bonding process, and I happily joined in. We were all unsure about how to do spiritual care – the uncertainty was our common suffering – and we became united in the task of learning.

When Carol got left behind after the class suddenly switched rooms during a break, I went to find her. She was pleased, and things moved on – I didn't think much more about the incident (although I did notice for myself that it was an act of compassion). But the next class, when we were each asked to share one of our "things I learned about myself," Carol offered a beautiful and insightful assessment of what went on in her mind when she discovered the class had gone, how relieved she felt when I had found her, and how this had led her to an insight about how she grapples with situations requiring resourcefulness. I reassessed whether mindfulness was really so foreign to these Catholics.

I shared in writing with one of the Catholic chaplains that I found myself interested in learning more about Catholicism. She replied that I might like to speak with my classmates because they represented a cross section of what she called "Big Tent Catholicism." I had never heard the term, but had an immediate intuitive idea about what it might mean. It reminded me of Mahayana! The "great vehicle" that can carry all beings might be similar to the "Big Tent" that can hold all people. I realized I had encountered an unseen bias in my mind because I had considered Catholics to be a fairly uniform set – I thought all the splintering had occurred among the many types of Protestants.

The next week, we were asked to respond to the question "How do you see God?" There were four choices offered, covering all the possibilities of a God who is involved in human affairs or distant, and who is judgmental or benevolent. We also read an article showing statistics of how a cross section of Americans had responded. One person raised her hand right away and said she was surprised that any Catholics would choose a "distant" God. When we conducted that poll among the nine students in our class, one Catholic indeed chose that view. I realized at that moment that those two Catholics had fundamentally different views of God. My own difficulty in answering the question at all suddenly seemed less outside-the-norm. I simultaneously saw the diversity of our individual religious views, and the unity of our pursuit of spiritual meaning in life.

The easing of my initial feelings of difference came along with letting go of some expectations and ideas and deepening my appreciation for the material we were learning. It cannot be easy to put together a 7-week curriculum that trains people from any faith tradition to be able to offer spiritual care in a hospital, and yet, these two chaplains were doing a remarkable job of it. One of our readings was from a book called "The Art of Listening," which I have seen on Gil's bookshelf. One vignette featured a Zen monk. When I viewed the material with a broader perspective, I began to see how it included many elements in a coordinated way – not as a jumble or mere surface-level treatment, as I had first assumed. And it did include some Buddhist elements, along with Christian, Jewish, and other spiritual traditions.

I changed my attitude from expecting a comprehensive, academic-level treatment of the various topics to a more practical outlook of gaining an overview of topics that are *useful for chaplains*. This dissolved both the arrogant feelings of "I know more" about some topics and the self-critical feelings of "I know nothing" about others. I could respect my own contributions and could open to learning new things.

I began to hear my classmates' comments in different ways. Three times, people used the phrase "I felt enlightened" to refer to an experience of insight that gave them a more useful way of relating to a situation. Our readings referred to the act of "emptying," which meant letting go of self-concerns and placing the reins in God's hands. Rather than worry about whether these terms were used "correctly" in a Buddhist sense, I understood that they pointed toward spiritual concepts that I could grasp generally without needing to be a stickler for details. After all, the English terms used in Buddhism are themselves translations anyway!

Hearing these terms also alerted me to the possible danger of misunderstanding someone's terminology, so I set an intention to ask for clarification before assuming I know.

### *A Shift Occurs*

The second verbatim we did for homework was a role-played situation ("choose a friend or enemy to help you" – I was tempted by the latter!) where I did not know what scenario was unfolding; my friend chose the situation.

It turned out she was acting as the lesbian partner of a woman who had just had a premature baby that was not doing well. I was the chaplain for her as her partner slept. When I asked if she'd like to pray – part of the standard "script" we are supposed to say if the opportunity seems right – she asked for metta. (My margin notes say, "Ah, a Buddhist!"). So I went ahead and spontaneously created a metta "prayer," which got written into the verbatim.

In class, a few people were selected to read their verbatims to the group with the help of someone else in the class. Of course I was selected! When we got to the metta, I put my whole heart into repeating that prayer. It consisted of focusing on and breathing into the heart center, then expanding awareness to include the two partners and the baby. I literally touched my heart area as I spoke, and I genuinely felt the metta flowing.

Then the class had a chance to respond to the verbatim. Suddenly I felt self-conscious, as if I'd revealed something quite intimate by manifesting metta to a group with no connection to that practice. I had exposed my own religious feeling in public, in a non-Buddhist setting – possibly something I had never done before. No one had spoken yet. I realized I was not confronting any external resistance or confusion, but rather my own ambivalence about revealing and sharing my devotion. The separation I had felt from my classmates at first, which had slowly dissolved, had now suddenly reappeared – and it was all internal!

Their response was amazing. They were curious, asking what metta is, and could a non-Buddhist offer it? I stumbled through some explanations and descriptions, then gave up that line of speaking. Indeed, I am not the representative of all of Buddhism. Even more amazing were the emotional responses they shared. Several people said how beautiful the prayer was, and how they were moved by it. One woman offered an insight: She had noticed how the awareness we were asked to cultivate moved in and out from our own heart to encompass other beings, then back to our own heart – and that this was similar to the in-and-out breath that we were also focusing on. I had never seen metta in that way, but it fit the way I had conducted this particular prayer.

So it seems the Catholics were interested to learn more about Buddhism also. Once again I felt different, but with no particular judgment attached to it. Just like flowers are different without being superior or inferior, and are unique without being special.

### *Buddhist and Human*

From the experience of this class, I feel able to say that there really is some universality in ideas like Love, Charity, and Compassion. This is not a rigorous understanding based on a comparative-religion analysis, but a simple assessment from learning the principles of spiritual care that are considered common across all faith traditions. I don't know if metta is the same as the Love of Jesus, but in some sense, so what? It seems that invoking metta in my own heart has a positive effect on those who believe in the love of Christ. Perhaps that is sufficient for offering spiritual care across faith traditions.

Although the journey has barely begun, I have taken a few steps toward being able to hold my own Buddhist faith (yes, that word is OK) within a larger religious picture without feelings of painful separation. I am learning to appreciate the multiplicity of faith traditions and simultaneously feel comfortable with my own, without needing to compare.

The Buddha points toward this balance in aspects of the teachings on identity. Identification is any tendency to claim experience as "me," "mine," or "my self." The Buddha states emphatically that identification is certain to bring suffering. But the Buddha refused to say directly that there is no self, only that experience is *not* self; it is empty of self (anatta).

I have made the mistake of interpreting anatta to mean that the only solution to the suffering of identity is to have no identity, to reject identity, to refuse to be anything. This does not work. Perhaps in an absolute sense, we can say that identity ceases, but here in the relative world, the aim is simply not to *cling* to who we are at a given moment, but to let it flow freely in its ever-changing nature.

When I began the class, I was required to be a Buddhist – when one is a student of spiritual caregiving, one comes from a certain faith tradition. My initial discomfort was caused by a dysfunctional relationship with that required identity. Sometimes I clung to it as something positive (and hence superior) and other times as something I wanted to get rid of or was uncertain about. Freedom began to develop when I could hold the Buddhist identity more lightly – pick it up when appropriate, put it down when unnecessary.

The Sutta Nipata says of the Sage, there is "nothing in him that he grasps as his, and nothing in him that he rejects as not his." (Sn IV.10; 858).

When this is the case, our hearts and hands are freed from a heavy burden. We become both more open and receptive and more available to help others.

When I reflect on the amazement I feel about being involved in chaplaincy training, I realize that I am curious about religion now because in some way, it is no longer threatening. I am committed to a Buddhist path, but have no need to defend it or use it to define who I am. Although I know this in my heart, I had to go through the process in the SCVMC training course to shake off some old habitual attachments. And the process continues...