

The Path to Buddhist Chaplaincy: Academic Education, Religious Endorsement, Professional Board Certification

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Introduction

Many people interested in the application of Buddhist or contemplative religious practices to alleviate the suffering of other people are discovering chaplaincy or spiritual care as a professional calling. Cultivating a Buddhist practice that strengthens inner qualities and resources – such as compassion, insight into interdependence, and reduced reification of “self” – builds capacity for offering presence and fearlessness in the face of others’ sufferings. These, it turns out, are vital qualifications for spiritual care providers. As the profession and practitioners both begin to recognize a mutual good fit, it’s worthwhile to explore the emergence of Buddhist Chaplaincy, the contributions Buddhist teachings and practices can make to chaplaincy, the training that is required and available for people wishing to pursue this path of Right Livelihood, and the challenges that exist in the development and professionalization of chaplains from a minority religion in the USA.

Buddhist chaplaincy emerged as a form of engaged and humanistic Buddhism into the larger field of chaplaincy within the Judeo-Christian context of the U.S. Since the early 1900’s professional chaplaincy in the U.S. has been developing standards of education, clinical training, spiritual formation, ethical competencies, and certification. Recently a think tank called The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab was created through Brandeis University, bringing together chaplains, educators, researchers, and clinical supervisors from a range of settings and traditions to “foster research and its practical application to improve the provision of spiritual care for all.”¹ While Buddhist chaplaincy is relatively young, it nonetheless has unique offerings to make to the larger chaplaincy field in terms of contemplative praxis, presence, and reflexivity. The field of Buddhist chaplaincy is beginning to form ethical standards of role,

¹ <http://chaplaincyinnovation.org>, accessed 2/1/2020

competence, and endorsement, which align with the larger professional field, as well as consider perspectives within the Buddhist context of history, culture, and tradition. This article offers an overview of these developments, particularly for those interested in seeking an academic degree, endorsement, and a career that will align their spiritual values with existing, recognized professional and educational requirements.

The emergence of Buddhist chaplaincy can be contextualized within the growth of Buddhism as a minority religion in the United States, presenting unique needs and opportunities for Buddhist practitioners and Buddhist communities. Many people in general are turning to Buddhist leaders and communities for guidance through self/other understanding, suffering, and emotional/spiritual development. This raises questions about the identification of religious roles and how to best prepare people in various roles to meet these needs: compassionately, skillfully, ethically, and with mature spiritual authority. In part this is shaped by traditions within Buddhist lineages and schools. Additionally, as Buddhist sanghas are expanding and growing throughout the U.S., the kinds of pastoral/spiritual care and counseling skills associated with training for chaplains and clergy in the USA is becoming, for some Buddhist teachers, spiritual leaders, priests, ministers, and senior students, more and more necessary.

In 2014 Buddhist Ministry Working Group² formed through a Buddhist Ministry Initiative conference³ at Harvard Divinity School. The group, comprised of Buddhist chaplaincy educators and sangha leaders, has been working together to create and support a comprehensive collaboration within a mutually supportive network of Buddhist educational institutions involved in the development of students and the field of Buddhist ministry. The intention of this group is to cultivate the specific field of Buddhist chaplaincy, as well as the broader field of Buddhist ministry to include leadership training and community service.

A lack of awareness and clarity around the current field of Buddhist chaplaincy and ministry can confuse professional boundaries, dissemination of knowledge, and ethical standards. In order for future Buddhist chaplains to thrive in healthy ways, the standards of

² Elaine Yuen, Faculty Explore Possibilities for Buddhist Chaplaincy in the West, Buddhist Ministry Working Group, 2017, <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2017/03/23/faculty-explore-possibilities-buddhist-chaplaincy-west>, accessed 01/22/20

³ Education in Buddhist Ministry: <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2015/04/23/video-education-and-buddhist-ministry-whither-and-why>; What Does It Take To Be A Buddhist Ministry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cKqMOnuCbE>; How Should We Train Students to Be Chaplains: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp2ahUIHp2g>, accessed 01/22/20

practice, roles, and competencies need to be clarified. Buddhist Chaplaincy development (formation) is both an acquisition of skills and knowledge, and a cultivation of inner qualities resulting in a personal ripening. Professional certification as a chaplain follows three main criteria: 1) educational, 2) clinical, and 3) community endorsement. Once these criteria are met, a chaplain candidate may apply for professional certification. Given the newness around Buddhist chaplaincy education and endorsement, in particular, there has been some flexibility for creating equivalencies in these areas; however, this may become the exception moving forward. The following sections attempt to outline processes of training, religious education, endorsement, and certification for those interested in becoming a Buddhist chaplain. The authors aim to note the highest standards necessary in order to meet care recipients in ways that are mutually beneficial, ethically sound, and from the heart.

Chaplaincy Professional Certification Requirements for Buddhist Chaplains

There are four requirements for the highest standard of professional chaplaincy in the U.S. Buddhist chaplains with professional certification would complete:

1. Educational Training: A 72 unit accredited graduate degree in Buddhist chaplaincy or the equivalent as determined by the Association of Professional Chaplains. A degree may be a Master of Divinity (MDiv) or Master (MA).
2. Clinical Training: 4 units (one year total) clinical training from approved Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) chaplaincy internship/residency programs.
3. Endorsement: Received from the Buddhist community (sangha) within which the chaplain candidate identifies and practices.
4. Board Certification: Received from the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC) which requires additional employment as a chaplain and a certification review process.

Education Requirements

This section will focus on discussion of the academic religious or “theological” education required. Students interested in becoming a Buddhist chaplain often enroll in an accredited college or university to complete the required 72 unit graduate degree and earn a Master of Divinity (MDiv) or Masters (MA) in Buddhist chaplaincy. An accredited college, university, or educational institute/organization is authorized to confer academic degrees by a national organization (e.g. Association of Theological Schools), or a regional organization that is

recognized by the national Council for Higher Education Accreditation (e.g. Western Association for Schools and Colleges). Some states also have accrediting bodies (e.g. Higher Educational Coordinating Commission of Oregon), which oversees and enforces educational standards. Other states, for example California, do not have such state accrediting bodies. Accredited Buddhist chaplaincy educational programs, are visited and reviewed by the accrediting body to ensure that their curricula, faculty, administration, and so forth align with national/regional/state educational requirements and academic standards. Accreditation from national/regional accrediting bodies authorized by the United States government Department of Education, serve as the imprimatur of a degree program's validity, ensuring it will be recognized nationally and internationally by other schools and employers as a credential.

The Association of Professional Chaplains (APC) requires that applicants for APC board certification have either an accredited 72 unit graduate theological degree, or successfully demonstrate comparable religious educational training through the APC's Theological Educational Equivalency process. Prior to the advent of accredited Buddhist chaplaincy graduate programs, this was a particularly important way Buddhists received recognition for training in Buddhist temples, monasteries, or settings other than accredited universities. This continues to be a viable path.

To guide the assessment of the religious and educational training accrued by individual Buddhists while also creating common standards recognizable across diverse Buddhist traditions, the APC in 2006 worked with a Buddhist task force to create "A White Paper"⁴(2006). This White Paper has served to assist Buddhist chaplains in developing equivalencies for certification by recognizing their Dharma training, mentorship, meditation retreats, and rituals. This has been helpful, but the Buddhist White Paper was formulated before many U.S. Buddhist chaplaincy MA/MDiv programs existed. More recently, pathways for APC recognition of educational training from institutions without federal accreditation have included assessment of that institution's educational program curricula. For instance, the APC assessed the MDiv program at Maitripa College, which holds degree granting authority in the State of Oregon, and determined that its graduates' degrees would be recognized as the Theological Educational Equivalent of accredited degrees, thus eliminating the need for individual candidate applicants to pursue the APC equivalency process on a case by case basis. Similarly,

⁴ https://bcciprofessionalchaplains.org/files/equivalency_forms/buddhist_white_paper.doc, accessed 4/14/2020

Upaya's Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program has been assessed by the APC as the Theological Educational Equivalent of 48 graduate credits.

Current Buddhist chaplaincy MDiv/MA program's educational standards align with the academic degree requirements of the APC. The APC identifies thirteen essential areas of study which apply to MDiv curricula in any religious tradition. Categories of study include courses in religious history, foundational religious teachings and tenets, sacred texts, ethical frameworks and development, world religions or comparative religions, ethnic and cultural diversity, chaplaincy, spiritual care and counseling, communications skills, spiritual/religious education, professional ethics, spiritual/religious leadership within communities/organizations, and supervised faith-based internships. Religious studies classes teach the philosophy, hermeneutics, texts, and canonical languages of Buddhism. Degree programs may offer coursework that emphasizes some areas more than others according to their university and program mission, values, and philosophies. However, all programs cover all thirteen areas. Degree programs may also vary in philosophy, organization, and how pedagogy reflects the founding Buddhist tradition based on age of the program, geographic location, and faculty. In addition, students may choose an area of focus that interests them.

All programs aim to support and guide the student in developing a sound basis for their practice of Buddhist chaplaincy. Curricula may include classes on the history, texts, teachings and practices of Buddhism, the history and theoretical foundations of chaplaincy, spiritual formation, contemplative care and counseling practices, structures of power and privilege, Buddhist ministry, leadership, and pastoral care, interfaith dialogue and competence in non-Buddhist traditions. Chaplaincy classes are often interdisciplinary and include a range of relevant topics including communication and counseling skills, healthy boundaries, and power dynamics within professional and personal relationships. Buddhist educational programs weave in non-Buddhist sources and methods of assessment, care, and counseling. Students learn how to build bridges to non-Buddhist faith-based systems and apply Buddhist scriptures to real life situations. Classes are sometimes also open to Buddhist community leaders outside the degree program.

Internship and Residency programs

Educational programs also consider clinical standards, which are outlined by the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (ACPE)⁵ when devising curriculums. ACPE accredits Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) programs where Buddhist chaplains complete internships and residency training to gain hands-on experience. Most CPE programs throughout the U.S. are housed in hospital systems, though some hospices have CPE programs, and some CPE programs place chaplain interns and residents in university, prison, nonprofit organizations, and temple/church/community settings. CPE internships are usually one unit, 300 clinical hours plus 100 educational hours, offered on part-time or full-time basis. CPE residencies are usually three or four units over the course of a year and offer modest stipends. Although most Buddhist chaplaincy educational and clinical programs highly value in-person learning, some programs are exploring online/hybrid learning in order to provide distance learning opportunities for a diversity of students.

Endorsement

In addition to education and clinical training requirements, aspiring APC board certified chaplains are required to obtain endorsement from their faith community. The purpose of endorsement is to ensure that the endorsee is educationally, doctrinally, and developmentally qualified to represent their faith community in the specialized setting of chaplaincy. It is an acknowledgement in the form of a letter from a faith community, which certifies that the endorsee has the knowledge and pastoral ability to represent their tradition and provide spiritual care to others facing sickness, trauma, and death.⁶ Endorsement will only be recognized by the APC if it is conferred by a Faith-Based Endorsing Body approved by the APC.

The process of BCCI certification can be challenging for some Buddhists, particularly if they seek educational equivalency. For some obtaining endorsement can also pose a challenge. There are less than 50 certified Buddhist chaplains in the U.S. to date, and only around twenty-something Buddhist communities currently approved by the APC as Faith-Based Endorsing bodies. One reason for this has been that the religious professional role of a “chaplain” has neither been part of Asian traditions nor the formation of Buddhist communities in the West.

⁵ Association of Clinical Pastoral Education website, accessed 01/22/20, <https://www.acpe.edu/>

⁶ Elaine Yuen, Endorsement for Buddhist Chaplains, Wisdom Now Naropa Magazine, <http://magazine.naropa.edu/wisdom-traditions-fall-2017/features/upaya-buddhist-ministry.php> Accessed 01/22/20

More recently, the APC called upon a second Buddhist task force comprised of individuals from Buddhist chaplaincy MDiv/MA and training programs in the U.S. Their task was to create: 1) a user-friendly endorsement form for both endorser (i.e., Buddhist teacher/community) and endorsee, by adapting language from the original Christian endorsement process, and 2) a structure to ensure that those applying for certification are affiliated with a recognized Buddhist lineage/tradition/organization. The APC recognizes that for most religious communities, the spiritual maturity of the endorsee is recognized and determined according to the standards articulated within that community. The seek to both uphold professional standards and also adapt to the unique needs of aspiring Buddhist chaplains.

The resulting new Faith-Based Community Endorsing Body Recognition application for Buddhists was completed in 2018 and is available upon request from the APC. Buddhists seeking board certification are encouraged to take this form to the leadership of their Buddhist communities and develop processes and materials collaboratively. Examples from other recognized Buddhist Endorsing communities may offer helpful models.

APC Certification Overview

The APC is considered the primary certifying body because it upholds the highest standards for becoming a board-certified professional chaplain. There are no certifying bodies for individual religions. Requirements for BCCI follow national qualifications and competencies common to all chaplains.

In order to become a board-certified chaplain through the Board Certified Chaplain, Inc. (BCCI), Buddhist chaplain candidates will need an accredited 72-unit educational degree (or Theological Educational Equivalency), four units of CPE, endorsement by a recognized Buddhist community, (as described above). In addition, they need to complete one year of chaplaincy employment and essays that demonstrate professional competencies. The first level of competency that the BCCI requires is development and articulation of the candidate chaplain's integration of theory and practice. The second level of competency is the development of professional identity, conduct in relation to others, skills in relation to systems, professional practice, and organizational leadership.

Certificate Programs

Buddhist certificate programs vary from those situated in academic settings to those that offer various forms of Buddhist contemplative caregiver and practitioner training based on the tradition/organization issuing the certificate. Certificate programs may be within a university/college, a nonprofit organization founded by a recognized Dharma teacher with chaplaincy experience, or in partnership with a recognized Dharma center/community/sangha. Programs may be part-time, full-time, hybrid, or intensive low residency models geared toward the adult learner. They aim to enhance skills in pastoral/spiritual counseling, contemplative care, and mental health. Some programs offer specific certificates in Buddhist contemplative care, counseling, ministry, or chaplaincy, to professional caregivers in the fields of medicine, psychology, social work, etc. While a certificate alone is insufficient to meet professional certification standards for educational credits, it may be a wonderful compliment to anyone in a caregiving or helping profession, as well as to train sangha leaders in pastoral/spiritual care and counseling skills.

Hospice and prison volunteers, Buddhist monastics, priests, and other serious practitioners may also seek to learn basic reflexive listening, contemplative care, and chaplaincy skills to integrate with their Dharma training. Depending on the setting and the leadership, Buddhist chaplaincy certificate programs can be strong in integrating Dharma training, but those outside academic settings often do not provide more academic components. Also, the training by and for Buddhist lineages, often intended for leaders of sanghas and temples, is not necessarily sufficient for training as a chaplain, which by definition is a religious professional working outside their own religious affiliation or congregation to serve the spiritual needs of all people.

However, some certificate programs are entering into agreements with seminaries or other Buddhist universities to make a bridge for those that would like to build a broader foundation for their service as a chaplain and/or complete the academic requirements for APC certification.

Conclusion

There is often a question as to why the MDiv/MA in Buddhist chaplaincy requirement is 72 units as opposed to the usual 48 units of an MA degree in Buddhist Studies, and why the year-long internship and endorsement processes exist. This relates to the APC requirements,

but also to the educational foundation, maturing process, and time necessary to grow into the role of a chaplain. Generally speaking, this development includes not only building a strong theoretical foundation for one's ministry, but also instruction, practice, and training intended to deepen one's faith and/or spiritual development, as well as the development of the clinical skills necessary to serve wisely and well. This maturing process goes beyond intellectual learning of theories and information. It takes time in an educational program, time practicing as a chaplain in a supervised internship and time in relationship with a Dharma teacher, mentor or guide, and sangha community, to grow into the role competencies of a chaplain.

There are complexities in accreditation, endorsement, and certification. There have already been some cases in which students have been taken advantage of monetarily, and misled based on ignorance, miscommunication, and the belief that there is an easier way, a short cut, and/or from trusting a person or institution claiming to offer valid education or endorsement when they were unable to do so. It is very important, as responsible educators and institutions that degree and training programs as well as and endorsers not mislead students, and/or take advantage of their aspirations, time, and money.

At the same time, there is a value to having many pathways, and not a one size fits all modality. Some Buddhist chaplains may need to get education, clinical hours, endorsement and certification through more grassroots organizations, and communities/schools without accreditation, or organizations that do not meet the highest standards. A new generation of aspiring Buddhist practitioners are motivated to find right livelihood and serve the world in roles of Buddhist chaplain, minister, priest, lay leader or monastic. As educators, institutions, and practitioners seek to develop capacities to serve others, we must continue to strive for high standards that will support the spiritual/ethical development of future Buddhist chaplains and ministers.

This paper is intended to describe the highest standards of academic education, as well as clinical experience and religious endorsement, needed to prepare Buddhist chaplains to meet care recipients in ways that are mutually beneficial, ethically sound and from the heart. Those interested in pursuing a career in Buddhist chaplaincy are warmly encouraged to seek meaningful discussions with educational institutions and training programs, and to join others in this emerging field bringing their compassionate presence to alleviate suffering so needed in this world.