

BUDDHIST CHAPLAINCY AS A MEANS OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION, PRACTICE, AND SERVICE FOR THE YOUTH

by Priya Rakkhit Sraman*

ABSTRACT

Service to others is an integral part of Buddhist spiritual practice. Since its inception Buddhism has always emphasized service, as attested by the Buddha's admonition to the first sixty arahants to go individual ways to help others. Today, monastics across Buddhist societies are actively engaged in different forms of social service such as promoting education, health, or mental development. University chaplaincy is one such form of service that many Buddhist practitioners in the West have been actively engaged in. Through this, Buddhist chaplains provide care to university communities with the help of Buddhist teachings and practices. As the Buddhist chaplain at Tufts University (Massachusetts, USA) since 2016 I have been teaching Buddhist meditative practices, moral principles, doctrinal issues, rituals and other aspects of Buddhist spirituality to the Tufts community. In this paper I will discuss how I have incorporated Buddhist teachings and practices into my chaplaincy work. In doing so I will address the various challenges that have come up in my interactions with students and colleagues. I will also show that Buddhist chaplaincy is a useful way to teach Buddhism to the youth. Unlike a class on Buddhism, the chaplaincy allows students to engage with Buddhist philosophy,

* Buddhist Chaplain, Tufts University, Massachusetts, USA

principles, meditative practices and rituals all at the same time while making these part of their personal lifestyle. Most importantly, the students come to such activities not to fulfill class requirements, but because these Buddhist practices sustain their spiritual and mental well being. Many of them share them with their families as well.

My paper will also talk about the multi-faith setting in the secular university in which I work as a Theravada Buddhist monk. In serving the communities at this university, I have also been growing in important ways. Thus my chaplaincy work fulfills both my own spiritual needs and the needs of others.

“Monks, there are these four kinds of persons found existing in the world. What four? (1) One who is practicing neither for his own welfare nor for the welfare of others; (2) one who is practicing for the welfare of others but not for his own welfare; (3) one who is practicing for his own welfare but not for the welfare of others; and (4) one who is practicing both for his own welfare and for the welfare of others”.

“... The person practicing both for his own welfare and for the welfare of others is the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four persons.” Anguttara Nikāya, 4:95.¹

Here, the entire humanity is categorized into four types of persons simply based on the impact of their practice. The best of them all is the person, irrespective of their social identity, who is practicing both for his own welfare and the welfare of others.

This categorization allows for some interesting thoughts on Buddhist practice in relation to ministry. When it glorifies anyone who is working for their own welfare as well as for the welfare of others as the supreme kind of person, it clearly emphasizes the high regard that Buddhism has for a life of service towards all, oneself included in it. This means that one's Buddhist practice has to aim at uplifting oneself and others in order to keep it in line with the Buddhist ideal of the supreme person as per the above categorization. Buddhist ministry, chaplaincy included in it, is one of the ways of doing this practice.

1. Bodhi, B. (2016). *The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, p.99.

That Buddhist practice is geared towards personal and social welfare is visible since the beginning of the history of the Buddhist community. We see this clearly in the Buddha's admonition to the first sixty disciples as he tells each of them to take up separate paths in order to help others for their wellbeing, happiness, and prosperity out of compassion for them.² In fact this practice of striving to benefit others while helping oneself is visible in the spiritual pursuit of the Buddha himself. The Pali term "Buddha" is defined in the Pali commentary as "one who understood and realized the four truths as well as made them comprehensible to others".³ The Buddha is so called because he understood the truth as well as taught it to others. The idea of it being that all the work for enlightenment is not only to achieve something for himself alone, but for benefiting others at the same time. Thus when he became enlightened, he did not only gain insight into the reality of things in order to liberate himself from ignorance, but also the ability to enlighten others so that they also can be liberated. The rest of Buddha's life shows us how this was in practice. Even in his deathbed, the Buddha was eager to listen to people's concerns and curiosities, and he helped them as much as he could.

The Buddha was a leader who taught by example. By his own examples of caring for others through his spirituality he showed how the best kind of person lives and practices. Hence it is perhaps not an exaggeration to claim that his admonition to the disciples was also to live a life directed towards caring for others through their spirituality. We can perhaps say that the admonition to the sixty disciples to tread on separate ways for helping others is an indication of his vision for the Buddhist community and its spiritual

2. "caratha, bhikkhave, cārikam bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya athāya hitāya devamanussānam. mā ekena dve agamittha" (Vinaya Pitaka, Mahāvaggapāli, Mahākhandhaka, Mārakathā). tipitaka.org. *Pali Tipitaka* based on Vipassana research Institute's Chatthasangayana. Available at: <https://tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/vin02m2.mul0.xml>. [Accessed 5 February. 2019.]. translation provided by me.

3. "Yasmā vā cattāri saccāni attanāpi bujji, aññepi satte bodhesi; tasmā evamādhipi kāraṇehi buddho. Imassa catthassa viññāpanatthaṃ "bujjitā saccāniti buddho, bodhetā pajāyāti buddho"ti" (Vinaya atthakathā, veranjakandavannanā). tipitaka.org. *Pali Tipitaka* based on Vipassana research Institute's Chatthasangayana. Available at: <https://tipitaka.org/romn/>. [Accessed 5 February. 2019. translation provided by me].

life that was there from the very beginning of the Buddhist history. Perhaps we can call that the start of the establishment of Buddhist ministry, and of Buddhist chaplaincy.

Before deciding on that, let us have a clearer understanding of what Buddhist chaplaincy is.

WHAT IS BUDDHIST CHAPLAINCY

Buddhist chaplaincy is a form of care directed to different sectors in the society for the wellbeing of its members in terms of their psycho-physical health. As such there are Buddhist teachers and practitioners serving as Buddhist chaplains to people in universities, colleges, prisons, hospitals and hospices. BuddhistChaplains.org, an online resource center for and about Buddhist chaplaincy, developed by Jennifer Block in consultation with several of her chaplain colleagues informs that Buddhist chaplaincy aims at caring for others in times of difficulty, loss, old-age, sickness, and stress to assist them in understanding their conditions properly and/or to decrease the suffering. Such caring happens in various ways such as by “being a good listener, an encouraging companion, an intelligent guide, or a piercing truth-teller.”⁴ Some of the ways that spiritual support can be given in such situations, as the site informs, are as follows:

- Willingness to bear witness
- Willingness to help others discover their own truth
- Willingness to sit and listen to stories that have meaning and value
- Helping another to face life directly
- Welcoming paradox and ambiguity into care — and trusting that these will emerge into some degree of awakening
- Creating opportunities for the people to awaken to their True Nature.⁵

4. Block, J. (2011). *A Definition of Buddhist Chaplaincy*. [online] BuddhistChaplains.org. Available at: <http://buddhistchaplains.org/cmsms/index.php?page=definition-buddhist-chaplain> [Accessed 5 February 2019].

5. Block, J. (2011). *A Definition of Buddhist Chaplaincy*. [online] BuddhistChaplains.org. Available at: <http://buddhistchaplains.org/cmsms/index.php?page=definition-bud>

Although this site has not yet included university chaplaincy as one of the avenues of Buddhist chaplaincy, I can say from my own experience of working in the university setting as a Buddhist chaplain that the above points are some of the most essential skills that help my work.

To add just a little more to what Buddhist chaplaincy may look like, or to just summarize what has been mentioned above, I would just say that it is one way of offering oneself as a spiritual friend (*kalyānamitta*) to others.

BUDDHIST CHAPLAINCY AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY

Although there are some cases of Buddhist chaplains working in hospitals, prisons and hospice centers, it is not as common in university settings. Tufts University, located in the state of Massachusetts, is one of the few universities that has an active Buddhist chaplaincy position, myself being the first one to occupy it technically. Although I am the first Buddhist chaplain at Tufts, I have not been the first to offer such service to the Tufts community. Before joining as the Buddhist chaplain I had joined Tufts as a replacement to my own brother Venerable Upali Sramon who was serving in the Buddhist in Residence position for two years during his masters in Harvard Divinity School which is not far from Tufts. Reverend Gregory W. McGonigle, the Tufts University Chaplain since 2013, felt the need for enhancing the Buddhist religious and spiritual life to help the community of students who were looking for Buddhist practices. Due to his association with Harvard Divinity School, as he studied for a Master of Divinity there, was aware of the Buddhist Ministry Initiative (BMI) program there. The BMI at Harvard Divinity School, which is the first of its kind at a divinity school within a research university, focuses on training future Buddhist religious professional in terms appropriate to modern, global conditions, offering them various useful skills in Buddhist thought, practice, language, and other arts of ministry that enable them to take up positions in various sectors in the society such as in educational institutions, healthcare, leadership and etc. When Reverend McGonigle contacted BMI about enriching the Buddhist

life at Tufts, Venerable Upali Sramon who was then doing his Master of Divinity there decided to join Tufts as the first Buddhist in Residence in 2014. After two years of his wonderful service and graduation from Harvard Divinity School, Venerable Upali Sramon left for his PhD in Atlanta. Thus the Buddhist in Residence position has been left empty. In the meantime, I was a third year Master of Divinity student at Harvard Divinity School looking for a place to do my field education.⁶ Thus the timing was perfect for me to join Tufts as the second Buddhist in Residence in 2016. Needless to say that it provided me great opportunity to utilize my learnings in service of others by means of educating them about Buddhist teachings and practices. Thus, even after my graduation from Harvard Divinity School I have continued to serve the Tufts community. The most noticeable thing to have changed is my title — now the Tufts Buddhist chaplain.

As the Buddhist chaplain at Tufts, I continue to provide Buddhist religious and spiritual guidance to the community, most of which consists of the undergraduate students, in various different forms. With great help from the Tufts Chaplaincy office and the Tufts Buddhist Mindfulness Sangha — also known as Tufts Sangha is the Tufts Buddhist club run by students — with whom I collaborate closely, I help to enrich the practice of Buddhist life on campus as much as possible. This is done in many different ways as given below.

3. THE ACTIVITIES OF THE TUFTS SANGHA

As I collaborate with the Tufts Sangha in planning, organizing and accomplishing most of the Buddhist activities at Tufts, I am going to refer the activities as “our activities” and will be using “we” instead of “I” to refer to the Buddhist community as opposed to making myself the only agent behind the many activities that are done. Most of the activities to be discussed below are collaborations between the Buddhist chaplaincy and the Tufts Sangha. To give a very general example of our collaboration, the Sangha helps with

6. Field education is an assignment that the Master of Divinity students have to fulfill in order to complete the degree. It has to be related to their arts of ministry. I chose to develop the arts of pastoral care, administration, and counseling as my arts of ministry through my field education at Tufts.

a lot of the planning and logistics, while I - the Buddhist chaplain - help with mostly leading the events. Although there is a lot of overlapping pertaining to particular activities.

Perhaps this is a good place to also explain what is understood by “Tufts Sangha”. By the term “Sangha” we mean the community of members who are practicing Buddhism and working to make such practice possible at Tufts. It includes local and international, traditional and non-traditional, religious and non-religious, and even non-Buddhist-identifying students. Despite so many differences what is emphasized here is the unity among the members in their shared desire to learn about and from Buddhist teachings and practices in order to help oneself and others. Thus it is a harmonious and healthy community always keen on learning and practicing together.

Some of the most regular and impactful ways that sustain Buddhist life at Tufts are as follows:

Meditation: Twice every week, on Monday and Friday, we meet at noon in the university’s multi-faith chapel. We start our practice with group meditation. Our meditation practice is mostly focused on developing mindfulness, concentration, and loving kindness. Sitting, walking, eating, and loving kindness meditations are some of the most common practices that we do. Our meditation usually goes on for about thirty to thirty-five minutes. At the end of the meditation we all recite the Karanīyamettha Sutta - “Discourse on Loving-friendliness” - as translated by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana.

The group meditation session is an important opportunity for spiritual practice for the students. In the group meditation session students associate with a feeling of ease and assurance as they see their friends and classmates practicing together. Furthermore, practicing together in this manner creates a kind of wholesome spiritual friendship among them that continues even outside of the meditation sessions.

Dharma Discussion: After each meditation session there is a dharma discussion session. In this session we read some Buddhist and spiritual texts on different Buddhist teachings and essential

values such as gratitude, inter-being, noble eight-fold path, precepts, justice, care. We then engage with the text, and with each other, in the process of understanding the practical import of the contents. These discussions arouse many important questions which we all try to think and discuss together. They provide students the opportunity to engage with each other more actively.

Our discussion sessions allow students to express their ideas and critical thinking without any pressure of being judged by any means. As it is not part of their academic curriculum there is no fear of having to give the perfect answer in order to get high marks. With the freedom to be themselves they then open up and interact with each other in an honest and genuine manner. Furthermore, I usually guide the discussion in a way to get the most out of it in terms of understanding the Buddhist teachings and values. In such ways, the dharma discussions are occasions where we learn with and from each other.

Full Moon Celebration: Another important event that we organize is the celebration of the full moons during the academic year. This event is mainly for educating the community about the significant events in Buddha's life connected to the different full moon days. As most of the participating students have had no previous knowledge of Buddhism, this helps them to learn it little by little along with the traditional customs of chanting, offering flowers, incense and etc. Most of the students who have participated in the Buddhist events have shown great interest in the Buddhist chants. Although it is hard for them to pronounce the Pali words, they have never stepped back from reciting it. They usually follow after me to chant the regular Pali recitations of the qualities of the triple gem, the offering of flowers, the offering of incense, the five precepts, asking for forgiveness, and the Karaniyametta sutta.

Retreat: We organize an off-campus retreat every semester. I lead the retreat for the students who are about ten to fifteen in each group. The retreat is a combined experience of all the previous activities mentioned above — meditation, chanting, discussion, reflection. This is also when the students spend almost all of their time together — sharing a dorm room, eating daily meals and meditating, discussing. There is a big section of the retreat time for practicing

complete silence. During this practice students do not communicate in any way. They are very much in the practice — mindfully attending to their current experience. Thus even if they are together, they are still able to be attentive to their individual experiences.

The rationale behind creating this silent practice is manifold. One aim is to give the students a chance to quietly listen to their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and any other experiences that they are going through. This is very different from their usual time on campus when they are extremely busy attending to school works, projects, readings, clubs or other interests. As a result the silent practice allows them to explore themselves, and perhaps even to re-discover parts of their being. On the other hand, silence allows them to observe the world around them with more attention. It arouses critical thoughts and concerns that are then essential content for the discussion when the discussion time comes. The discussion is another favorite part of the retreat for the students.

Important Buddhist teachings such as interdependence, impermanence, caring, sharing, diligence are some of the core topics for the discussion exercise. In these exercises students are given the time to reflect on these teachings based on specific Buddhist quotes from the Buddhist Canon before sharing their understanding with everyone. This practice allows for deeply attending to one's own thinking process, listening to another's thoughts and reflecting on the importance of the teachings to learn from them.

Apart from serious practices the retreat also provides an opportunity to have fun through activities like making origami, drawing, poetry, stories, and etc. Almost all the activities during the retreat are done in groups — all together. Hence there is a strong wholesome connection among the students by the end of it.

Field Trips and Guest Speakers: Boston has several Buddhist centers practicing different Buddhist traditions such as Tibetan, Taiwanese, Zen, Korean, Insight. We go to these local Buddhist centers during special events. It gives us the chance to experience different Buddhist practices and customs from the different Buddhist traditions. It also allows the students to see the variety in Buddhist practices.

We also invite local Buddhist practitioners from these centers to the Tufts Sangha. Listening to their unique experiences, practices, and spiritual pursuits provide valuable knowledge, inspiration, and motivation to us.

At the end of each academic year we organize the Buddha Day event to commemorate the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha. Many Buddhist monastics, teachers, and practitioners are invited to this event to chant, meditate, and eat together.

Interfaith activities: Apart from having events centered solely on Buddhist practices and for the Buddhist community we also collaborate with other spiritual groups on campus to hold events. Such occasions create interfaith friendship and understanding of each other.

Pastoral Care and Counseling: I also provide personal counseling and pastoral care to those who seek such guidance. I meet with students one on one to talk about their personal situations. I have realized that these meetings are important to the students as they face numerous challenges that they want to discuss with someone trustworthy. Sometimes even listening to them is big help for them.

4. THE SANGHA - A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

We have seen how and what things are done in the Tufts Sangha. In this section I will talk about the various ways those activities continue to benefit the participants and to sustain their spiritual growth. What follows is a result of my direct experience being in the middle of all things and from what the students have reported to me about their experiences.

As seen above, most of our activities in the Tufts Sangha are done in groups. This in itself is an essential practice for the students. This is not to say that only the Sangha provides group activities throughout the entire campus. But the Sangha maybe the only place where the students come together to spend time in complete silence — sometimes half an hour, sometimes several hours. This silence is not because people are trying to avoid each other, but instead a result of their attempt at trying to reconnect

with themselves and with one another — just being themselves, attending to themselves without putting forth any judgement. It allows them to acknowledge and appreciate each other's presence wholeheartedly.

Part of the reason for silent practice is to enable ourselves to be focused on the development of mindfulness, of loving-kindness, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity, of gratitude, and other wholesome virtues. Even if we are verbally quiet we are still creating wholesome thoughts towards ourselves and each other when we are practicing loving-kindness meditation. Thus our practice helps us to become more accepting of one another and more understanding towards each other.

Silence is only one of the practices that we do together. Just as silence is helpful in the process of understanding, so is proper communication. A lot of mutual care happens in our discussion sessions. In those sessions we do not only talk about doctrinal principles, but also share personal difficulties. It is a space where vulnerability is wholeheartedly welcomed. It is a place where we acknowledge everyone's situation and if possible also offer helpful responses. I have witnessed as senior students provided useful information to their juniors on campus life, on academic matters, on study-abroad programs. I have noticed how new students are excited to be a part of the Sangha because their friends have recommended it to them. I have also seen how those with differing opinions are comfortably listening to each other, in case they could learn something of value from the other.

Furthermore, the experience goes beyond the group. For many of them, the Sangha is probably the first ever space to practice and learn Buddhism. Hence they want to make good use of the opportunity and maximize its benefits. As they continue to find benefits in their practices, they want to share it with others. In our group discussions, and in one on one meetings, the students share issues that they have had with people in their respective families, relatives or friends. We talk about helpful ways of dealing with those issues through Buddhist practices and teachings in order to have better relationships in their families and friend circles. This helps them to take their practices with them when they meet their

relatives. They share their learnings and practices with their family and friends in the hope of creating a wholesome relationship. They even invited their family to some of our events.

Graduating students ask me for ways to continue their Buddhist practices when they leave from Tufts. Whenever they get a chance they make sure to visit us to reconnect and practice one more time.

Thus, the Buddhist practice that happens in the Tufts Sangha is not only transforming the lives of the students who are practicing, but in some way it is also having positive effects on several others such as their families and friends. It is one of the essential things that sustain the students during their challenging times on campus. It is one of the good things that they remember and take with them when they leave Tufts.

5. HOW BUDDHIST CHAPLAINCY IS A SUSTAINABLE MEANS OF EDUCATION AND SERVICE FOR THE YOUTH

As we have seen, the existence of a community that engages with Buddhist spiritual practices on a regular basis is immensely helpful to the formation of the students' continuous spiritual growth. It is no doubt that the presence of a fully ordained monastic such as myself, who has been in the tradition for more than sixteen years, with experiences in both monastic as well as academic world of Buddhism, has been an enriching factor for the Tufts Sangha. On the other hand, the opportunity to directly meet with a Buddhist teacher to discuss about Buddhism is a wonderful opportunity for the students. The Buddhist chaplaincy provides that opportunity to them.

I have made myself useful in the advancement of the Tufts Sangha's Buddhist life through constant supervision in their Buddhist activities — meditation, study, retreat — giving them helpful direction both in practice and thought to study and understand Buddhist teachings. My attempt has been to provide an enriched experience of Buddhism to the students in terms of its various traditions and practices. I do this by means of giving them the opportunities to have direct experience through practice, through interactions with other Buddhist practitioners/teachers, and through meaningful discussions/investigation.

Through the various Buddhist activities and events organized throughout the semester, students get a broader and holistic understanding of Buddhism. The intellectual and practical aspects are kept in balance so as not to lose sight of the other, but to develop both at the same time. As there is no specific requirement that needs to be fulfilled in our sessions, we in the Tufts Sangha have the freedom to choose texts that are relevant to our practical concerns. In other words we study texts that have a practical significance in our lives, so that we can find ways to implement the teachings in our personal practice instead of leaving them in our conceptual world only.

An other benefit of Buddhist chaplaincy in the university is that it creates such Buddhist programs that are continuous throughout the whole academic year, not limited to just one particular semester. This means that interested students can continue to study and practice Buddhism for the entirety of their stay in the university. On the other hand, even if they miss a particular semester because of class schedules, study-abroad programs, or other reasons, they can always resume their connection with the Buddhist practices anytime later. Furthermore, for those who stay connected to the group and have a continuous practice for the entirety of their college life, it is a wonderful opportunity to concretize their relationship with the practice that they can take away with them upon graduation. Thus it not only sustains them during the college, but even afterwards.

In an international university setting mostly everyone is discussing, critiquing, challenging, and investigating different ideas, information, theories, and practices in relation to local as well as global issues. Buddhist teachings and practices that are relevant to global issues of modern times have a lot to offer to such institutions to make a positive impact. It only makes more sense to create the conditions for such interactions between Buddhism and universities in relation to the important issues. Buddhist chaplaincy allows for enriching those interactions.

When such interactions do take place it is not only the case that the communities in the university are learning from Buddhism, but that perhaps Buddhists are also learning from the university communities. In order to interact with students engaged in modern ways of thinking Buddhism also has to learn how to converse in

their ways and language. To do that, we have to listen to them first. Listening can inform us about things that the young students are desiring to know. It can help us to investigate the implications of Buddhist teachings in order to respond to their queries appropriately. In this way Buddhist chaplaincy does not only help university communities to benefit from Buddhist teachings, but in the process of doing so it also urges Buddhists to become adept practitioners and thinkers. It is a journey of continuous growth.

Thus Buddhist chaplaincy becomes an important means of educating others about Buddhist teachings and practices. In the process of this service it helps to educate us Buddhists about discovering new ways of serving. Thus the whole process becomes a practice of caring for ourselves as well as for others.

6. CONCLUSION

In his admonition to the first sixty disciples Buddha tells them each to go on separate routes so as for each disciple to encounter and benefit more beings — “two of you do not go by the same [road] (*mā ekena dve agamittha*).⁷ If we pause for a bit to reflect on this important piece of advice by Buddha we can see more in it than a simple suggestion to go by different roads. Perhaps one useful way to reflect on this advice is to see that the Buddha is actually suggesting us to find out different skillful means of utilizing our learnings and practices in the interest of helping more beings. The implication of it would then be for us to see how else we can benefit the various sectors of the society; perhaps even to ask ourselves: are we doing enough to respond to the needs of others? What can we do to benefit others and how? Perhaps with such questions we can discover ways to improve ourselves while also helping others. And that is a useful understanding of the Buddha’s advice of taking separate routes. It is not just separate roads, but separate tasks, skills, services.

Buddhist chaplaincy in universities is such a service that can benefit people in the universities. These people who are too busy to

7. Vinaya Pitaka, Mahāvaggapāli, Mahākhandhaka, Mārakathā. *tipitaka.org*. *Pali Tipitaka* based on Vipassana research Institute’s Chatthasangayana. Available at: <https://tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/vin02m2.mul0.xml>. [Accessed 5 February. 2019.]. translation provided by me.

commit to other forms of Buddhist practices in other locations can gain a lot by the presence of Buddhist spiritual teachers on campus.

If we are to provide such services in universities we must first actively work on ourselves in order to prepare our skills. Perhaps that would motivate us to be interested in our own learning and practice even more. But is that not what the Buddha categorized as what makes one supreme - “practicing for one’s own welfare and the welfare of others”?

REFERENCES

Block, J. (2011). *A Definition of Buddhist Chaplaincy*. [online] Available at: <http://buddhistchaplains.org/cmsms/index.php?page=definition-buddhist-chaplian> [Accessed 5 February. 2019].

Bodhi, B. (2016). *The Buddha’s Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.

Vinaya Pitaka, based on Vipassana research Institute’s Chatthasangayana. [online] Available at: <https://tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/vin02m2.mul0.xml>. [Accessed 5 February. 2019].

