

Buddhist Chaplaincy in the United States and Japan: Critical Reflections on Cross-Cultural Practice and Lived Experience

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How do we connect Buddhist teachings with effective service? Buddhists uphold the ideal to respond compassionately to suffering in our ever-changing world. Buddhist chaplains in particular take on roles of serving those who are in crisis, imprisoned, sick, dying, or grieving. Yet what compassionate engagement looks like evolves and continues to change because Buddhist chaplaincy is shaped deeply by historical and cultural factors that shift across time and place. This becomes clearly visible when we compare how Buddhists from different contexts approach chaplaincy.

In March 2024, chaplaincy leaders from Japan and across the United States gathered at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley to reflect on the practice and foundations of Buddhist chaplaincy.¹ Over a three-day period, participants discussed the state of chaplaincy in their respective countries as well as how Buddhist chaplains are trained and formed. The gathering fostered a sense of community among Buddhist leaders, educators, and students interested in chaplaincy. Participants formed nourishing relationships, exchanged ideas, and were deeply moved and inspired by one another. In addition, cross-cultural dialogue made it evident that we stand to benefit from learning about different chaplaincy contexts and approaches, particularly from those who practice in other countries. In the words of Rev. Dr. Daijaku Kinst,

1. We are grateful for the funding and support that enabled this workshop to take place, especially from Professor Mark Blum and the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley; the Buddhist Ministry Working Group (now renamed the Buddhist Spiritual Care Educators of North America); the Numata Foundation; and the Institute of Buddhist Studies.

who played a key role in conceptualizing this workshop, “Dialogue between us clarifies and deepens our understanding and provides us with opportunities to develop new perspectives, to examine and reassess our cultural assumptions and cherished principles, and to enrich practice and service in chaplaincy.”² Our capacity to hold a substantive conversation in real time was enhanced by the excellent translations of Beth Cary, as well as by the cross-cultural knowledge and experience that several workshop speakers and audience members shared.³

Many of the insights that emerged from this workshop are presented in the papers brought together for this special issue of *Pacific World*. We believe these articles make significant contributions to the field of Buddhist chaplaincy. The emerging field of Buddhist chaplaincy studies began with the foundational work of defining spiritual care from a Buddhist perspective, identifying key Buddhist teachings and practices that can serve as its basis, and offering Buddhist frameworks or models for chaplaincy practice.⁴ Meanwhile, edited volumes have compiled overviews and perspectives from different countries on specific topics within Buddhist spiritual care such as death, bereavement, natural disasters, and other crises.⁵ Other publications have emphasized the need to raise awareness about, and to adequately address, the histories, needs, and concerns of diverse Buddhist practitioners in America beyond the stereotyped binary of white convert Buddhists

2. Kinst in this issue, “Foundations and Dialogues in Buddhist Chaplaincy,” 221.

3. For a commentary on the workshop that incorporates historical and current Japanese contexts of spiritual care, see Jonathan S. Watts, “Is Buddhist Chaplaincy a Form of Socially Engaged Buddhism? Reflections on a Japan-US Dialogue,” <https://jneb.net/is-buddhist-chaplaincy-a-form-of-socially-engaged-buddhism/>.

4. These include Cheryl A. Giles and Willa B. Miller, eds., *The Arts of Contemplative Care: Pioneering Voices in Buddhist Chaplaincy and Pastoral Work* (Wisdom Publications, 2012); Nathan Jishin Michon and Daniel Clarkson Fisher, eds., *A Thousand Hands: A Guidebook to Caring for Your Buddhist Community* (Sumeru Press, 2016); Monica Sanford, *Kalyāṇamitra: A Model for Buddhist Spiritual Care*, 2 vols. (Sumeru Press, 2021–2025).

5. For example see Jonathan S. Watts and Yoshiharu Tomatsu, eds., *Buddhist Care for the Dying and Bereaved* (Wisdom Publications in collaboration with the Jodo Shu Research Institute, 2012); Nathan Jishin Michon, ed., *Refuge in the Storm: Buddhist Voices in Crisis Care* (North Atlantic Books, 2023).

versus Asian immigrant Buddhist sanghas.⁶ Building on such previous contributions, the articles in this issue deepen our understanding of the cross-cultural foundations that have shaped Buddhist chaplaincy in its present forms and of the resources offered by living Buddhist practitioners for enriching and refining Buddhist chaplaincy in the future.

Each author in this special issue of *Pacific World* offers the opportunity to learn from contemporary Asian or Asian American Buddhists as they envision and engage in the practice of spiritual care. The first three articles by Rev. Dr. Daijaku Kinst, Dr. Jitsujo T. Gauthier, and Dr. Elaine Yuen adapt principles, practices, and models for spiritual care from the contributions of living Asian-heritage Buddhist practitioners. In a climate where such contributions are often unrecognized or undervalued, Kinst and Gauthier assert the importance of learning from those with long-standing familial, monastic, and cultural immersion in Buddhist teachings and practices. They respectively draw from the lives and ritual practices of contemporary Japanese Buddhist women and from the Buddhist pedagogy of the Vietnamese monastic scholar Ven. Thich Vien Ly to create cross-cultural models for chaplaincy practice and education. Yuen documents how she trained mostly first- and second-generation bilingual Chinese-English speakers to attend to the physical and spiritual needs of disaster survivors via Tzu Chi USA, the American chapter of a Taiwan-based Buddhist humanitarian organization. Together, these three essays demonstrate self-aware, innovative, and respectful ways of leveraging cross-cultural knowledge and experience to develop Buddhist chaplaincy theory and practice for North American settings and beyond.

Like Yuen's article, the next two contributions by Rev. TAKAHASHI Eigo and Prof. KIGOSHI Yasushi also take up Buddhist spiritual care in times of disaster. Both Takahashi and Kigoshi discuss local impacts of the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, examining how it led them to change their practice or understanding of Buddhism. Takahashi, a Sōtō

6. Pamela Ayo Yetunde and Cheryl A. Giles, eds., *Black and Buddhist: What Buddhism Can Teach Us About Race, Resilience, Transformation, and Freedom* (Shambhala Publications, 2020); Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (North Atlantic Books, 2021); Chenxing Han, *one long listening: a memoir of grief, friendship, and spiritual care* (North Atlantic Books, 2023).

Zen abbot serving in the severely impacted coastal town of Ōtsuchi, recounts how his responses as a spiritual caregiver changed in the face of mass fatalities and bereavement. These included supporting narrative meaning-making, connection to deceased loved ones, and community healing through spiritual care conversations and later through a collaborative book project memorializing the lives of the disaster victims. Kigoshi's article details memorial-making practices for young tsunami victims that emerged organically in the Yuriage area of Natori city. He makes a case for taking contemporary lay Buddhists as authorities of their own tradition and for rethinking how Japanese Buddhist leaders and scholars could address contemporary social problems and needs. Finally, Rev. HIRANO Shunkō's article offers an introduction to death row chaplaincy in Japan, along with distinctive perspectives on human connection and transformation that integrate Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist teachings and practices with his decades of experience among inmates. Together, these moving and reflective essays provide valuable windows into spiritual care in Japan, sharing practices and approaches that could be adopted in other settings.

Across the fields of chaplaincy and spiritual care, scholars and scholar-practitioners have recognized the need for intercultural spiritual care that respects and is equipped with basic literacy in the religious norms, values, practices, and beliefs of those seeking care.⁷ In our view, the very models we adopt for intercultural spiritual care should be deeply informed by theories, approaches, and practices based in religious traditions beyond the Christian ones that have dominated these fields throughout their history in the West. Our hope is that the articles published here will contribute not only to the field of Buddhist chaplaincy in particular, but also to the broader project of reconstituting theories and practices of chaplaincy and spiritual care for diverse communities.

7. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, rev. ed. (Jessica Kingsley, 2003); Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, rev. ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015); Emmanuel Y. Lartey and Hellena Moon, eds., *Postcolonial Images of Spiritual Care: Challenges of Care in a Neoliberal Age* (Pickwick, 2020); Wendy Cadge and Shelly Rambo, eds., introduction to *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 5–6; Carrie Doehring and Allison Kestenbaum, "Introduction to Interpersonal Competencies," in *ibid.*, 129–131.