Foundations and Dialogues in Buddhist Chaplaincy

Daijaku Kinst
Institute of Buddhist Studies, Professor Emerita

Editors' note: Rev. Dr. Daijaku Kinst established the Buddhist chaplaincy program at the Institute of Buddhist Studies and served as the Noboru and Yaeko Hanyu Professor of Buddhist Chaplaincy from 2015 to 2022. She is a Sōtō Zen priest and guiding teacher of the Ocean Gate Zen Center in Capitola, California. In this article, Dr. Kinst provides an introduction and orientation to the state of chaplaincy and Buddhism in North America. She suggests that Dr. Paula Arai's research on Japanese Buddhist women's experiences of healing can be applied to clinical chaplaincy. Dr. Kinst demonstrates how the ten principles of healing in Dr. Arai's work provide a model for chaplains to conduct spiritual assessments, choose appropriate interventions, reflect theologically, and sustain themselves for a lifetime of service.

Chaplaincy is an increasingly diverse field, extending beyond the traditional fields of healthcare, prisons, and the military to the challenges posed by the immediate and long term impacts of the climate crisis, war and displacement, poverty, isolation, and being unhoused and hungry as well as the harmful bias, inequality, and injustice that contribute to suffering. Buddhist ministry, in all its forms, requires the ability to address diverse and often challenging circumstances. The ability of Buddhist chaplains to draw on the Buddhist teachings and practices that guide and sustain them allows them to make unique and valuable contributions as we negotiate these challenges. Building a robust foundation in the teachings, and considering carefully how they shape, inform, and guide our understanding of suffering, the alleviation of suffering, and the practice of chaplaincy and ministry, supports Buddhist chaplains in their work, in their relationships with colleagues, in sustaining themselves as they serve diverse

people in diverse circumstances, and in growing and deepening our understanding of the field as whole.

The need for this foundation is particularly true in North America. The fundamental assumptions we have, much of them culturally determined, about the nature of the self, reality, and healing profoundly impact the way we understand chaplaincy and the principles that underlie it. Many, though certainly not all, people who are drawn to Buddhist chaplaincy in North America do not have the benefit of long standing familial and cultural immersion in the teachings and practices of Buddhism.[1] And Buddhist chaplains have reported struggling to "overcome assumptions about Buddhism ... not only among the general public and multi-disciplinary teammates, but also among their fellow chaplains, supervisors, and CPE peers."[2] Such assumptions are often based on ignorance of basic Buddhist doctrines and practices, as well as stereotypes and misconceptions about "heritage" versus "convert" Buddhism, "traditional" versus "modernized" forms of Buddhism, and Buddhism based on text-centric perspectives versus how Buddhism may be applied in spiritual care encounters.[3]

The rapid spread of Buddhist teachings and practices, and their redefinition in popular culture, has led to a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about Buddhism and its teachings and practices. Confusion about Buddhist teachings and practices can lead to confusion about how they can form a sound and creative basis for chaplaincy. Developing a solid understanding of the teachings and how they can form a foundation for the practice of chaplaincy, together with the ways Buddhism has been shaped and perceived in premodern and modern times, is a crucial support for Buddhist chaplains as they develop the resources they need to effectively serve individuals and groups of any (or no) faith tradition in diverse settings; as they

1. Monica Sanford, Elaine Yuen, Cheryl Giles, Hakusho Johan Ostlund, and Alex Baskin, *Mapping Buddhist Chaplains in North America* (Chaplaincy Innovation Lab, 2022), 21–23.

2. Sanford et al., *Mapping Buddhist Chaplains in North America*, 15.

3. For a critique of how such categories have been deployed and characterized, as well as a study of Asian American Buddhists who trouble such categories, see Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (North Atlantic Books, 2021).

dialogue as equals with peers of other traditions; and so that they can sustain themselves over a lifetime of service.

One brief example that is not unusual in North America illustrates this point. I attended a clinical pastoral education (CPE) mid-year consultation with chaplain educators and a Buddhist chaplaincy intern in which the chaplain intern described her intention to continue to cultivate her ability to "drop the self and simply enter a chaplaincy visit with an open and flexible mind." The consulting committee, which aside from me was made up of thoughtful Christian chaplains, understood her to mean that she was avoiding coming to terms with the narrative/essence that was central to her being (her core self), and therefore could not effectively attend to the person she was hoping to serve. It took some discussion to clarify that this was not what she meant—and that this misunderstanding was based in very different views of the nature of the self and the process of maturing in the service to others. All of us learned something in this discussion, but I also wondered what her encounter with this committee would have been like if she had not been well grounded in the teachings, able to articulate a clear and accurate Buddhist view of these topics, and able to demonstrate that it was compatible with the aims of field and the committee. How would this conversation have differed if she had not had a person in the room who could assess her presentation, support the legitimacy of it, and engage in dialogue with the committee?

Thinking more broadly, engaging in the exchange of thoughts, practices, and perspectives across academic fields, religious traditions, and cultures is particularly valuable between societies, such as those in North America, in which Buddhism has taken root only in the last 125 years or so, and those cultures and societies with long standing roots in Buddhist traditions. 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.

In this article, I propose one particular cross-cultural model of Buddhist chaplaincy I have developed and used in my own teaching.[4]

4. For other proposed models of Buddhist chaplaincy, see for example Cheryl A. Giles and Willa B. Miller, eds., *The Arts of Contemplative Care: Pioneering Voices in Buddhist Chaplaincy and Pastoral Work* (Wisdom Publications, 2012); Monica Sanford, *Kalyāṇamitra: A Buddhist Model for Spiritual Care* (Sumeru Press,

Using Paula Arai's *Bringing Zen Home* and its ten principles for healing as a guide for Buddhist chaplains, I suggest that this model provides skillful interventions from a perspective that is grounded in a Buddhist worldview, a much-needed tool especially for chaplains working in the Christian-dominated field of chaplaincy in the United States. The model provides a cross-cultural intervention that can enrich chaplaincy work in a variety of cultural contexts. Below I present the ten principles of Arai's book and apply those principles to chaplaincy.

CROSS-CULTURAL MODELS OF CHAPLAINCY: ARAI'S TEN HEALING PRINCIPLES

In 2013 I attended a symposium on practical ministry and chaplaincy at Ryukoku University in Kyoto, Japan. Preparing for this, I was considering what model of chaplaincy I could share that had a foundation in the Buddhist tradition and could best bridge any cultural differences. After pondering various Buddhist teachings and chaplaincy models, I recalled the work of Paula Arai in *Bringing Zen Home: The Healing Heart of Japanese Women's Rituals*.[5] Arai's work, which articulates the ten healing principles she identified in the lives and ritual practices of contemporary Japanese Buddhist women, was not intended to be used as a foundation for chaplaincy or ministry; it is an ethnographic study aimed at developing our understanding of contemporary laywomen's Buddhist practice in Japan. I was familiar with Arai's work in my capacity as a Sōtō Zen priest and teacher but had not thought of it as a foundation for developing a Buddhist model for chaplaincy and ministry.

Arai's work is a distinctly Buddhist understanding of healing, and perhaps a distinctly *Japanese* Buddhist understanding of healing. The principles she outlines describe healing in terms of cultivating, and/or returning to, an experience of being part of an interrelated, dynamic, relational world. Such an experience is understood to transform suffering and ease the anguish of isolation. Any model for chaplaincy developed from these principles would, therefore, be well grounded in

2021); Guan Zhen, "Buddhist Chaplaincy in the United States: Theory-Praxis Relationship in Formation and Profession," *Journal of International Buddhist Studies* 13, no. 1 (June 2022): 44–59; and Jitsujo Gauthier, "Contemporary Approaches to Buddhist Pedagogy" (in this journal issue).

5. Paula Arai, *Bringing Zen Home: The Healing Heart of Japanese Women's Rituals* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011).

Buddhist teachings and provide a wide field of exploration, study, reflection, and guidance.

The model, which I describe in more detail below, uses Arai's principles as the foundation for the assessment of a person, group, or system; a guide for possible responses/interventions to assessed needs; the basis for a Buddhist chaplain to reflect on their work from a Dharmalogical perspective (what is generally called theological reflection); and a means by which to consider their own well-being and how they might cultivate perspectives and practices that support personal sustainability.

It is important to note that chaplaincy responses and interventions are always crafted in such a way that they coincide with the values of the person being served, and one of the beauties of these principles is that they can apply to chaplaincy with a wide variety of people and circumstances. However, it should be noted that not all of these principles would be applicable to all chaplaincy encounters. The ten principles[6] are:

1. experiencing interrelatedness
2. living body-mind
3. engaging in rituals
4. nurturing the self
5. enjoying life
6. creating beauty
7. cultivating gratitude
8. accepting reality as it is
9. expanding perspective
10. embodying compassion

1. Experiencing Interrelatedness

If we assume that the Buddhist teachings of interrelatedness and interdependence do, indeed, reflect the nature of the of the world in which we live, and that the experience of oneself as separate, alone, and isolated is a central element in suffering, then any movement toward a realization of the interrelatedness of oneself and other beings will ease suffering.[7] In terms of this dimension, assessing the quality and nature

6. Ibid., 32.
7. Ibid., 33.

of a person's connection to others in their world, including humans, animals, inanimate objects, art, nature, spiritual beings, as well as other aspects of relationship, allows the chaplain to understand something of the nature and depth of a person's suffering (or a group of people's suffering).

With such an understanding and assessment, interventions can be considered that support the development of a deeper sense of connection. This could be as simple as moving a photograph of a beloved person, place, or being so that it is visible; listening to stories about a person long gone; facilitating contact with a person, animal, place, or object that is central to that person's relational world; praying with the person; and/or invoking a holy presence through meditating or chanting.

2. Living Body-Mind

In this understanding of humanity, mind and body are considered indivisible. Therefore, considering the needs of the body, not as a vehicle of the mind or the self, but as an integral part of each person's subjective experience, is essential. This includes a non-adversarial relationship to illness or physical difficulties.[8] Again, sensitivity and respect for a person's own worldview is crucial. However, in terms of assessment and intervention, the chaplain could, for example, attend to the ways in which changes in physical ability evoke a sense of alienation from the body. Interventions would be based on skillfully reducing that alienation and increasing an effective response to the situation as it exists. This might include facilitating a meeting with someone who has undergone a similar loss or change and has re-established a full and wholesome self-experience.

3. Engaging in Rituals

Rituals, in this context, are not necessarily related to a specific religious system. They are understood to be activities that enact a person's deepest values and relationship to their life and world. They also affirm the importance and relevance of these values and the person who is performing them. They can knit together the physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual aspects of a circumstance. Rituals are understood

8. Ibid., 34–37.

to do this with or without a cognitive understanding of how they function. They can be creative and quite ordinary, and can be done alone or with others.[9] The chaplain can help facilitate such activities if they seem appropriate—bringing a sacred image into a hospital room, conducting memorial or funeral services, marking important transitions such as leaving military service or ending treatment, planting a living thing in the earth, saying a familiar prayer, or reading or poem—all of these can be rituals.

4. Nurturing the Self

Attending to one's personal needs reflects an understanding that one's self and one's life matter. The teachings of interrelatedness point to a view in which, ultimately, we are not different from the universe itself, therefore caring for oneself is caring for the universe and all beings.[10] Assessing the ability of an individual to respect and effectively care for themselves allows the chaplain to open up a conversation about what supports or inhibits such self-care and an exploration of what might help address any needs in this area. For example, the chaplain might draw on relevant scripture or imagery that brings forth an understanding of self-care that is in harmony with a person's deepest values. Taking even small steps to care for oneself can build a sense of being of value—and experiencing a sense of inner value supports actions that care for the self. It goes in both directions. This is not an understanding of self-care rooted in a self-centered vision of the world and one's place in it; quite the opposite. It is a vision that supports a sense of proportion and responsibility. Taking oneself into account can be very difficult for some people. Assessing for this principle brings awareness to the level of responsibility a person feels for their own well-being and their capacity to act in support of it. Interventions are in line with assessments and, with sensitivity, support the growth of well grounded self-care.

5. Enjoying Life

Enjoying life, in this context, does not mean turning away from one's circumstances, nor does it mean that one should feel happy in the

9. Ibid., 37–42.
10. Ibid., 42–46.

midst of suffering and loss. Enjoying life, in this model, emerges from a recognition of the impermanence of life, a sense of care for life, and a curiosity about what true enjoyment is.[11] Assessing for this may not be possible or appropriate in some circumstances—in the face of great loss a person's capacity for joy may be erased for a time. However, if a chaplain is going to assess accurately the spiritual needs of a person, it is a dimension that must be included. What resources does a person have that bring them solace and enjoyment, what cherished memories, what affirming principles? Attending to such things can point a way toward supporting the emergence, or a return, to enjoying life. This dimension of healing requires cultivating a relationship with one's life in which joy and appreciation can co-exist with difficult circumstances. It recognizes that this can be deeply challenging. It also recognizes that joy can sometimes deepen in the midst of difficulty. This too needs to be appropriately understood.

6. Creating Beauty

Arai describes the central role an appreciation for beauty plays in Japanese culture. Beauty heals, in this model, and keeping an eye out for moments that invite it can transform a situation. According to Buddhist teachings, the self is dependently arisen and emerges, along with all other dimensions, in any circumstance. Given that, the inner and outer quality of a circumstance matters, and attending to it is an important consideration.[12] A chaplain may be particularly well suited to do that. Understanding and responding to what a person sees as beautiful may not be easy or even possible at times, but keeping an eye out for such things can shift an environment in positive ways. A person's sense that they have the capacity to create beauty can also be empowering, and offering opportunities to create beauty can be healing.

7. Cultivating Gratitude

Gratitude, from the perspective of these Buddhist teachings, arises naturally when one considers the interdependent nature of our lives—that life is supported by the activity of all reality, and each breath is only possible because of all living beings. To be able to say "thank you"

11. Ibid., 46–47.
12. Ibid., 47–48.

in the midst of difficulty is, perhaps, a defining characteristic of spiritual maturity.[13] Assessing for the presence of, or capacity for, genuine gratitude allows the chaplain to gain an understanding of a person's needs and resources for recovery and healing. As with many of these principles, an assessment of this dimension of healing can be challenging, and if a need is identified, any interventions must be handled with sensitivity and care. Again, one listens deeply and carefully and picks up cues that one can respectfully nurture and support.

8. Accepting Reality As It Is

Facing the first noble truth, the truth that suffering exists, is difficult. Facing it fully in times of distress can be the occasion of disintegration and/or transformation. Being willing to move toward accepting life as it is, not as we would like it to be or as we think it should be, creates, according to this model, the conditions for healing. Rejecting one's situation is draining and diminishes respect for one's self and one's life.[14] While recognizing the functional importance of denial and the necessary shielding it can provide when overwhelm threatens, a chaplain can look for large or small indications that there is a willingness to integrate what has happened and appropriately support the weaving together of a new reality that opens up possibilities. This means that the chaplain must challenge themselves to see clearly as much as possible. Assessing for, and responding to, denial and lack of acceptance appropriately, sensitively, and respectfully is an important dimension of pastoral care. Perhaps the most effective intervention in the midst of a dark and bitter time is for the chaplain to be present with it—without being swamped by it. This presence can open up a fuller view that supports a caring and stable response to what is.

9. Expanding Perspective

Cultivating the capacity for an expanded perspective on one's life, one's self, and one's circumstance empowers a person in their healing—particularly their ability to interpret the meaning and significance of events according to the values they hold most dear.[15] Assessing a person's capacity to expand their perspective, and supporting a person to

13. Ibid., 48–50.
14. Ibid., 50–53.
15. Ibid., 53–58.

move towards a view of themselves and their world that includes the depth and breadth of their life circumstances, allows the chaplain to effectively support a healing process that can unfold and deepen long after the chaplaincy encounter has ended.

10. Embodying Compassion

According to this Buddhist model, compassion is both a source of healing and an expression of healing.[16] That is, the root of healing and its fruit is the capacity to embody compassion. Attending to the degree and quality of kindness and compassion present in a person's situation allows the chaplain to address any lack with some sense of what will be most appropriate and most effective. Without compassion, the ability to be with oneself in the presence of suffering with care and kindness, in other words with the elements that support genuine healing, can be difficult if not impossible. If the chaplain embodies and models a vigorous, honest compassion, this can be the most effective intervention of all. To walk beside another in their distress in this way brings together all of the principles and supports their growth and expansion.

THEOLOGICAL/DHARMALOGICAL REFLECTION

Each of these principles can form the basis for what is generally termed *theological reflection*. A consideration of the implications of the term "theological" for Buddhist chaplaincy is outside the scope of this paper, though, as I noted above, terms such as Dharmalogical, or values-based reflection, offer valid alternatives.[17] Whatever term we use, if we understand this as a process in which a chaplain reflects deeply on the religious/spiritual principles and perspectives that guide their work, we can easily see how Buddhist teachings can form the foundation

16. Ibid., 60.

17. For deliberations on using the term "theology" or adopting newer terms such as "Dharmalogy" for Buddhist contexts, see Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky, *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (Routledge, 2000). I have previously discussed the use of the terms "theological" versus "Dharmalogical" in the context of Buddhist ministry, including chaplaincy; see Daijaku Judith Kinst, "Is Theological Education Entering a Post-Christian Future?," roundtable presentation at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, November 23–26, 2019.

for such reflection. Starting with any of the Buddhist teachings and/or the principles drawn from Arai's work, a chaplain would consider what they experienced, how they responded, what was missed, what lessons can be learned—and many other things. What does the Dharma have to offer as I seek to understand and respond to this person, this situation, this encounter? What teachings come to mind? What aspects of the sutras or other Buddhist writings seem most applicable? How might a consideration of the principles drawn from Arai's work shed light on unseen aspects of this person and circumstance? How can I support healing?

In this way, a chaplain can invite the teachings to enter the encounter, deepen their understanding, and transform their work. This can be done in a structured manner or simply in a spare moment. It can also be done with others in group settings and through written or oral presentations. Such reflections deepen chaplaincy practice and also hone the capacity of the Buddhist chaplain to effectively engage in dialogue with chaplains from other faith traditions. When a Buddhist chaplain has made well-considered connections between specific teachings, has developed a model of pastoral care and chaplaincy based on those teachings, and can articulate the ways in which this enriches their ability to serve the people in their care, they are able to speak and write with authority and bring new insights into the field.

SUSTAINING THE LIFE OF A CHAPLAIN

These principles can also be applied to the chaplain's life. By attending to these principles and returning to the Buddhist practices that support and affirm them, a chaplain can build a resilient foundation for a lifetime of service. These are completely portable practices that can sustain a chaplain in the day to day reality of their work and lives.

For example, experiencing interrelatedness can mean knowing one's place in the overall mandala of care in an institution—being a part of a team and not bearing the whole burden. It can also mean remembering the support that is present in one's life. Living body-mind is crucial—not attending well to the fact that one is a body is a very good way to burn out quickly. Engaging in rituals of various kinds can support the chaplain in all aspects of their work. For example, one can create rituals for starting and leaving work, metaphorically placing the people one is serving on an altar so that they are in the care of the

buddhas and bodhisattvas. Nurturing the self, enjoying life, and creating beauty: awareness of these dimensions helps contribute to a way of life that keeps joy, satisfaction, and a sense of humor and proportion alive. Cultivating gratitude keeps one connected to the gifts that are present in each moment and is a simple practice one can return to throughout the day. Reflecting on one's capacity for gratitude is also a good self-assessment tool for the chaplain. Accepting reality as it is can mean everything from a clear and honest assessment of an institutional structure to a deep realization of the teachings of interdependence. Expanding perspective is essential if one is to continue in the work for any length of time. This expansion is both concrete and immediate, and also endless, as one cultivates one's understanding of, and relationship to, Buddhist teachings. Embodying compassion is the essence of the work, in a way, and it requires that compassion and kindness be directed to oneself at least as much as it is directed to others. What is true compassion and what does it mean to embody it day by day? Such questions are an opportunity for deep and caring reflection.

CONCLUSION

The model for chaplaincy that I have formulated based on Arai's principles not only reflects Buddhist and Japanese cultural perspectives on life, suffering, and healing but is also compatible with the core principles of effective chaplaincy: the centrality of presence; the power of skillfully expressed compassion; the crucial importance of relatedness, care, and connection; the effectiveness of facilitating an inner sense of vitality, validity, and efficacy; as well as the healing quality of a mature sense of gratitude. Using each of these principles, or those that seem most applicable for a given situation, as a lens to understand a person, a circumstance, and a relational system (be it family, friends, a healthcare setting, a prison, a neighborhood, a military unit, a city, an ecosystem, a society) can provide a chaplain with insight into what can heal and how to support it.

When I presented this model at the symposium, there was a palpable sense of interest and recognition in the room, and a creative energy and sense of mutuality in our subsequent discussions. That this model is relatable to both contemporary North American as well as Japanese

people demonstrates that cross-cultural dialogue can uncover our similarities and shared humanity, as well as our differences.

In a way, a kind of enriching circle was completed. A linguistically and culturally proficient American professor (Arai) went to Japan, uncovered the wisdom in the lives of Japanese Buddhist laywomen, developed principles of healing based on her research, and presented them in a book that another American professor (me) read and adapted and took back to Japan, where a fruitful discussion took place that I think was of benefit to all of us. This, in turn, furthered the development of Buddhist chaplaincy theory and practice. Here in the United States, Institute of Buddhist Studies alumni have used this model to assess and respond to individual, family, and community needs at the end of life, as well as in other settings.

The example of the CPE consultation raised earlier can illustrate how Arai's principles may also be used for Dharmalogical reflection and to sustain the life of the chaplain. The Buddhist chaplaincy intern's stated intention to "drop the self and simply enter a chaplaincy visit with an open and flexible mind" invites chaplains to reflect on whether they applied Buddhist principles or allowed them to show up during their visit, such as experiencing interrelatedness, accepting reality as it is, expanding perspective, and embodying compassion (Arai's first, eighth, ninth, and tenth principles). Reiterating this intention, as a pithy encapsulation of such principles, could then serve as a means to apply such principles in future chaplaincy visits. In particular, the call to "drop the self" may be taken as a Buddhist reminder to let go of, or release, ideas of the self as separate, alone, isolated, or fixed;[18] and the call to "enter a chaplaincy visit with an open and flexible mind" may be taken as a commitment to accept reality as it is, to be open to expanding one's own perspectives, to embody compassion, and to be attuned to opportunities to foster these principles in others. If chaplains can also release or "drop" expectations for themselves to solve others' problems, to play the hero, to do it all by themselves or to do

18. From a Buddhist perspective, building a fixed narrative about a core self, or attributing some essence to one's self as a permanent objective entity, leaves one vulnerable to further suffering and misunderstanding. For an analysis of Sōtō Zen approaches to selfhood, see Daijaku Judith Kinst, *Trust, Realization, and the Self in Sōtō Zen Practice*, Contemporary Issues in Buddhist Studies (Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2015).

it perfectly—expectations that tend to be bound up with certain fixed ideas of the self—they can better build a resilient foundation for a lifetime of service.

The development of effective Buddhist chaplaincy in contemporary settings is dependent, I believe, upon the creative inclusion of perspectives drawn from diverse traditions and cultures. Each of us has unique, as well as shared, challenges to meet and contributions to make. As Buddhist chaplaincy grows and evolves in North America, Europe, Japan, and other countries, dialogue and exchange and the exploration of avenues of shared interest will transform the field of chaplaincy as a whole in beneficial ways.