

Multifaith Views in Spiritual Care

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Three *yanas* for wise caring

A Buddhist perspective on spiritual care

Danny Fisher

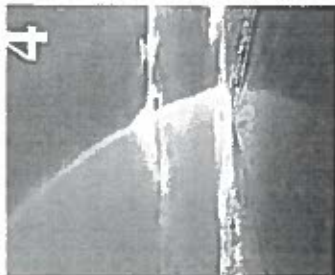
One of the misconceptions in the popular understanding of Buddhism is that it is a monolithic tradition—pretty much the same thing whether you are practicing as a *zendo*, a *vihara*, or a *gompa*.¹ In fact, Buddhism is made up of a constellation of schools, communities, traditions, and groups so vast and varied that many in the field of Buddhist Studies have begun to make a rhetorical switch to talking about *Buddhist religions*. For years, *The Buddhist Religion*, first authored by Richard H. Robinson and then co-authored by Willard Johnson in subsequent editions, has set the gold standard for textbooks on the subject. The most recent edition, which added Thanissaro Bhikkhu as an author, took the bold step of changing the title to *Buddhist Religions*.² From my vantage point as a theological educator and chaplain, this reality of Buddhist diversity makes doing any kind of systematic work inordinately difficult and often yields specious results; it is better, I think, as some new young scholars have argued, to speak of Buddhism in broad denominational terms.

Foundations

My own spiritual home is the Rosemead Buddhist Monastery in Rosemead, California, just down the road from where I teach at the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist-founded University of the West. The monastery is the headquarters of the Los Angeles Buddhist Union (LABU) and home to my

¹ For the readers ease, diacritical marks have been removed from Sanskrit, Pali, and other language terms. In some cases, these terms have also been phoneticized.

² Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions. A Historical Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2005).



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primary teacher Bhante Chao Chu, who has a deep and sincere commitment to Buddhist ecumenicism. As an ordained lay Buddhist minister in the International Order of Buddhist Ministers—which is overseen by Bhante Chao Chu and operates under the auspices of both the LABU and the intrafaith Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California—my responsibilities include observing the ten precepts and rules of conduct that have been devised, and supporting the LABU in its work of presenting “the universal truths of Sakyamuni Buddha’s teachings as recorded in the Pali Canon” and mission to “promote practice in meditation, mindfulness, Dharma study, and community engagement.” This involves serving and being of support to Buddhists of all kinds (and others) however I can. This approach has been the defining characteristic of my time in and preparing for Buddhist ministry.

By virtue of my education at the Shambhala Buddhist-founded Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, the Shambhala Buddhist tradition has been very important to me in my spiritual journey as well. Shambhala Buddhism has roots in the Kagyu and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and was established as a unique Buddhist path by the noted teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987). In traditional Tibetan Buddhism, the kingdom of Shambhala refers to a mythical, idealized place. Trungpa Rinpoche, however, taught that Shambhala could be conceived of as a vision for a very possible enlightened society. The key to realizing enlightened society, he suggested, was touching in with our own basic goodness, fearlessness, dignity, and compassion. Rinpoche believed that these qualities were the outcome of a deep and mature Buddhist practice. He also taught that Buddhism did not have a monopoly on the ability to cultivate them; on the contrary, he noted that we could see “spiritual warriorship” in many different places. It can be found in all the world’s wisdom traditions, from the code of the samurai to the experiences of the desert mystics to the deeds of the knights errant to the Native American way of life, and so on. In a bit of wisdom that I think is applicable to the practice of professional chaplaincy, Rinpoche once said:

While everyone has a responsibility to help the world, we can create additional chaos if we try to impose our ideas or our help upon others. Many people have theories about what the world needs. Some people think that the world needs communism; some people think that the world needs democracy; some people think that technology will save the world; some people think that technology will destroy the world. The Shambhala teachings are not

based on converting the world to another theory. The premise of the Shambhala vision is that, in order to establish an enlightened society for others, we need to discover what inherently we have to offer the world. So, to begin with, we should make an effort to examine our own experience [and help others to do the same], in order to see what [is there] that is of value in helping ourselves and others to uplift their existence.³

Trungpa Rinpoche’s ideas and the Shambhala principles have permeated much of my education. At the end of the day, however, my own deepest commitments are to Buddhist ecumenicism, interfaith understanding, and professional spiritual care and counseling. Part of working toward this has been my training and work as a chaplain.

Despite my own approaches to both Buddhism and religion broadly as incredibly diverse phenomena, I am moved by an observation from Lewis R. Lancaster, the mighty and prolific Buddhist scholar (and University of the West colleague) who was the first-ever recipient of the PhD in Buddhist Studies from the groundbreaking program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He says:

The frustrating thing . . . about the Buddhist tradition is that at every level, whenever we define it, we have already lost it. I ask myself how people can know that they are Buddhists. The one thing that all forms of Buddhism hold as their highest ideal is compassion. That seems as close to a universal answer as I can find . . . Buddhists, when they talk about compassion, say that if you are enlightened, you will have a deeper response to suffering. If insights do not lead to compassion, then it is not what the Buddha experienced at his enlightenment. This view makes an enormous difference.⁴

The Tibetan traditions which have been so helpful to me—and which are often said to contain the entirety of Buddhism’s diverse teachings—certainly share this view. It is important, though, to point out that there is a gradual deepening of our understanding of compassion as we progress through the *yanas* (literally, vehicles), or paths of practice, within this system.

The Buddha himself said he taught only two things—suffering and the end of suffering. In understanding the *yanas*—not to mention developing

³ Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 10–11.

⁴ Dairyu Michael Wenger, *Dharma Days* (Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate Communications, 2009).

what might be called a "Buddhist pastoral theology"—it is helpful to remember this fundamental aspect of Buddhist pedagogy. Compassion is the highest ideal of all Buddhists as they negotiate *samsara* (the painful cycle of life, death, and rebirth) and *nirvana* (awakening, freedom from that painful cycle). In the first *yana*, known as the *Shravakayana* (or, the Vehicle of the Hearers, or Vehicle of the Disciples), the Buddha's original teachings on the Four Noble Truths are of primary importance. These teachings articulate our existential condition and how it is that our suffering can end. They are: (1) the truth of the stress and dissatisfaction that come from realities that characterize our human condition; (2) the truth of the origins of this suffering in our grasping and craving; (3) the truth that the cessation of our suffering depends on giving up our self-centered grasping and craving; and (4) the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering (which is known as the Noble Eightfold Path). The Four Noble Truths explicitly detail our situation, as well as present us with options—awakening is possible, and there are certain methods for living this life more fully. Those methods are encapsulated in the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. These eight can be whittled down into three categories, or three trainings: *shila* (morality/ethics/virtuous conduct; this includes right speech, right action, right livelihood), *samadhi* (meditation/mental development; this includes right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration), and *prajna* (insight/wisdom; this includes right view and right intention). These three trainings undercut a sense of self and serve as the antidote to suffering by offering a path—a way to make a relationship with our suffering, a way of changing our entire experience of ourselves and our world, a way of experiencing ourselves and our world with the knowledge of no-self and the other realities taught by the Buddha. The three trainings are a path presented to us so that we might learn to settle into the truth of things as they are, and that we might minimize the amount of suffering we perpetuate in ourselves and upon others. This is why it is said in the *Samyutta Nikaya* and the *Visuddhimagga* that "when a wise one, well established in *shila*, / develops *Samadhi* and *prajna*, / then as a *bhikkhuni*, ardent and sagacious, / she succeeds in disentangling the tangle."⁵

A key soteriological tool in this endeavor to minimize and ultimately end one's own suffering—and then be of greatest benefit to others—is the cultivation of awareness through the practice of mindfulness meditation,

⁵ Quoted by Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown on September 29, 2003.

which is simply bringing our attention to the present moment with the help of an object such as the breath. Taught by the Buddha as the very foundation of the path toward the cessation of suffering, mindfulness meditation has proven to be enormously useful outside of Buddhist religious contexts as well.⁶ Mindfulness also plays a vitally important role for Buddhists engaged in professional chaplaincy work, as the following example demonstrates:

As they come into the morgue, the EMTs are delicate and deliberate—breaking the silence with the softest of whispers, and only when they absolutely must. Once inside, the gurney is gently positioned beside the cold chamber, where the small body beneath the sheet will be stored after all of the intake paperwork is finished. Chaplains are always present in these situations, and that is how I've found myself here—a fly on the wall.

Standing there, watching over the team as they wait, I catch myself turning away from what lies before us all. I gaze down at surgical instruments or look around the room for something else to distract me. Child fatalities are difficult to bear, even if you see them from time to time—indeed, they can be too much even to look at. Being close to such a loss is affecting, no doubt about it, and there is an impulse to turn away.

But I bring my attention back to the gurney and those in the room, remembering that it's my job to not turn away from suffering. As a chaplain, I'm there first and foremost to bear witness. I can offer care and counsel, of course, but I won't be able to do either of those things very well if I'm actively avoiding that which arises. Chaplaincy is about looking closely and listening deeply—trying to understand people and situations exactly as they are.

This is certainly consistent with my own Buddhist practice. In my spiritual life, I do my best to reduce unhelpful and harmful habitual tendencies and cultivate beneficial, truly compassionate qualities. I do this by trying to bring my attention to the present moment with deliberate, nonjudgmental awareness. It behooves my professional life to carry this discipline through to my work with others.

I recognize, too, the potential in staying with and exploring that unbearable feeling. When I'm able to just be with the feeling instead of avoiding it, I am able to understand it and then learn not to fear or try to avoid it. I turn into the suffering so that I might become braver and of greater benefit to others . . .

⁶ In 2007, for example, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, one of the National Institutes of Health, found that more than 20 million Americans had used meditation techniques derived from Buddhist or Hindu traditions for various health reasons in the previous twelve months.

In the second *yana*, the *Mahayana* (or, Great Vehicle), the *bodhisattva* ideal, is of principal importance. A rough translation of the term *bodhisattva* gives us "a being who is oriented towards enlightenment."⁷ According to one of my teachers, Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown, *bodhisattvas* are characterized by a number of important qualities.⁸ First, they do not think of things in terms of attainment; we may have certain goals or ideas of attainment that we apply to our spiritual practice such as becoming a more "peaceful" or "nice" person, but *bodhisattvas* are operating on another level entirely. Second, they "abide by means of *prajnaparamita*"—the "Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom," the way that has no sense of duality and no emotional or conceptual obscurations of mind. In other words, they do not abide in a particular *place* but in a particular *way*. Third, and on a similar note, they transcend that which is false, such as the notion of duality. Fourth, they are fearless—they properly confront that which is frightening; they have the courage of lions.⁹ Fifth, they attain complete *nirvana*, *anuttara samyak sambodhi* ("unsurpassable, true, complete enlightenment"). To put it in Acharya Simmer-Brown's words, it is this awakening that gives the *bodhisattva* her ability to "make light where once was dark." Finally, a *bodhisattva* is joyful—they enjoy freedom, and their spontaneous action is joyful.¹⁰

The *bodhisattva* derives these qualities through her cultivation of *bodhicitta*—the "awakened heart-mind," the basis for enlightenment in the *Mahayana*. When we speak of *bodhicitta*, we are speaking of two aspects: absolute and relative *bodhicitta*. Absolute *bodhicitta* refers to wisdom—the recognition of *shunyata*, emptiness; an understanding of the interdependent and transitory nature of all things. Relative *bodhicitta* refers to the practice of great compassion. Although these two aspects seem separate, they are, in fact, inexorably linked. If we can learn how to touch into absolute *bodhicitta*, we can learn how to make sense of relative *bodhicitta*—the absolute is directive in terms of the relative.

⁷ Damien Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 38.

⁸ This information comes from a series of courses taught by Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown at Naropa University, Boulder, CO.

⁹ I am reminded of the "demon story" told in the tradition, in which a great yogi takes the seemingly counterintuitive approach to an evil spirit: if one experiences fear, he bravely looks at what scares him and requests that it be his teacher.

¹⁰ Here, I always think of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, whose happy spirit has inspired millions, within and outside of Buddhism.

When we talk about the practice of compassion in relationship to *bodhicitta*, we are generally referring to particular practices, such as the four immeasurables, *tonglen*, and especially *pranidhana* (the *bodhisattva* vow). The *bodhisattva* vow is one's formal commitment to work for the awakening of others. It is a promise to be helpful in leading others to the experience of *nirvana*. Again, this is an important undertaking for the *bodhisattva* in that they realize the interconnection of all beings and that no one is free until everyone is free. This being the case, other beings offer us precious opportunities to work toward this highest form of awakening; without them, there is no chance of Buddhahood. It follows, then, that we should be grateful to others for the opportunity that they offer. Hence, a famous statement from the great practitioner Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who said, "The immediate causes for attainment of Buddhahood are other beings: we should be truly grateful to them."

The "great compassion of the *bodhisattva*" also refers to all the myriad beneficial ways in which the *bodhisattva* actively extends herself out to others. It is limitless compassion, rooted in the *bodhisattva's* understanding of the interconnection of all beings. It is a feeling of empathy that is tempered by the wisdom of emptiness—an open-heartedness that knows no territory and is rooted in the aforementioned ethic that says no one is free until everyone is free. The practice of limitless compassion is said to be more difficult than the practice of lovingkindness; the rationale behind this provocative statement is that unlike lovingkindness, limitless compassion takes us into the realm of problems that may be unsolvable—it is simply bearing witness in the face of suffering. To put it in the terms of *Mahayana* practice, this is why it is often said that "the *Shravakayana* transcends *samsara*, but the *Mahayana* transcends *nirvana*." In the *Shravakayana*, we are conducting a precise examination of our confusion in order to curb confusion in the future, while, in the *Mahayana*, the *bodhisattva* re-enters confusion with the noble heart of compassion. In the *Mahayana*, the focus is less on the confusion itself than it is on the quality of wakefulness available in each situation. Wakefulness is there first; argues the *Mahayana*—confusion is merely contingent. In the *Mahayana*, we must go "through" the confusion with compassion.

This is very different from what Tibetans call "idiot compassion," which is enmeshed in confusion. It is the same feeling of empathy but without the benefit of wisdom. The *bodhisattva* goes beyond conventional, suffering-inducing notions of what is helpful, confronting confusion with compassion and wisdom. Or, as James Whitehill puts it:

Moral virtue without *shunyata*, or transforming liberation, may be shallow and weak; but *shunyata* without moral virtue is blind and dangerous. She who has accomplished awakened virtue, the merging of skilled, well-disposed, rational moral agency with self-transforming spirit, is, in contrast, deep, strong, ever-maturing, and rational...by her character and deeds she reduces suffering and promotes friendliness, compassion, joy, and peace.¹¹

One way for the bodhisattva to achieve the balance of these two is through the practice of the *paramitas*. *Paramitas* literally translates "that which has reached the other shore."¹² When we speak of the *Mahayana paramitas*, we are talking about the "six perfections," or "attributes of Buddha activity," essential for a sentient being practicing on the bodhisattva path: *dana-paramita* (generosity), *shila-paramita* (discipline), *kshanti-paramita* (forbearance), *virya-paramita* (exertion), *dhyana-paramita* (meditation), and *prajna-paramita* (wisdom).¹³ As His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet explains, the original Sanskrit implies a transcendent quality to these activities in that "unlike ordinary generosity, etc., [the six *paramitas*] are untainted by attachment and other negative emotions."¹⁴ When one practices generosity, there often can be an egoistic edge to the undertaking. If we are practicing the virtues to be "nice," for example—so that we might be liked or impress others or make someone stop doing something that makes us uncomfortable—then we are not practicing them as *paramitas*. Similarly, we might think that the practice of the virtues will make us "good" people. If this were the case, we would again be practicing these activities for egoistic reasons.

Certainly, the conventional practices of generosity, etc., do not always come from a corrupt place. However, the conventional practices of the virtues do differ from the practice of the six *paramitas* in a very significant way. When a sentient being practices the virtues as *paramitas*, she is actively working toward dropping her sense of duality and strengthening her sense of interconnection. In other words, the bodhisattva practicing

the *paramitas* is deliberately chipping away at her ego. His Holiness continues, "When generosity and so forth are practiced as *paramitas*, are practiced with an understanding that the subject, object, and the action itself are all devoid of true existence, these acts become very profound and completely transcend ordinary generosity and so on."¹⁵ Implicit in this statement is that the bodhisattva must have the proper ground and path if this is to be realized. Whitehill explicates further:

The center of Buddhist tradition affirms that moral effort, mainly through practicing the *paramitas*, must be conjoined with meditative and transformative practices to be ultimately effective for oneself and for others. It also affirms that the practices of awakening have little foundation and less result, for oneself or others, without the frame, skills, and habit of moral practice.¹⁶

The following paradigm draws from the wisdom of the *Mahayana*; when we extend ourselves to others, the real inner-work deepens considerably. Working in service of her fellow sentient beings, the student/*bodhisattva* discovers that it is impossible to be truly generous, ethical, patient, perseverant, mindful, or insightful unless she is willing to look deeply at her intentions, motivations, fears, sorrows, and growing edges. But perhaps nothing is as effective in developing this awareness at the heart-level as working with and for others. The *bodhisattva* must engage. She has to start work immediately. Of course, she needs a view, a path, guidance, support, and care, but she must come up against the sufferings and needs of others if she is going to "wake up" and support others as they attempt to do the same. To learn and grow, the *bodhisattva* has to be in community, working for the benefit of others, trying to do the very best she can with what she has each and every moment.

It seemed fitting, then, that when we began our Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) internships we would also study and practice the *paramitas* in considerable depth as part of our Applied Theology I, a course I taught in tandem with CPE. As I worked with the *paramitas* during my rotation as a chaplain intern at a local hospital, I found that the teachings spoke to me like they never had before. The distinction between the conventional practice of the virtues and the practice of them as *paramitas* became much clearer. In struggling to practice the *paramitas* as *paramitas*, it became apparent to me just how difficult an undertaking this

¹¹ James Whitehill, "Buddhist Ethics in Western Context: The Virtues Approach," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 1 (1994), accessed February 10, 2006, <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/1/white1.html>.

¹² Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and Michael S. Diener, eds., *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, trans. Michael H. Kohn (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 169.

¹³ Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Mudra* (Berkeley & London: Shambhala, 1972), 102.

¹⁴ Tenzin Gyatso (His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet), *A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night: A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 1994), 134.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁶ Whitehill, "Buddhist Ethics in Western Context."

was. Moreover, it became painfully obvious just how often I mistook the conventional practice of the virtues for *paramita* practice. I recognized both of these subtleties immediately.

Interfaith practice

By way of answering whether and to what extent Mahayana practices, and Buddhism more broadly, make it possible to offer interfaith spiritual care in the sense of caring for people of other faiths, we do well to look at one example in the *paramitas*: the example of *dana-paramita* (generosity). As Acharya Simmer-Brown, has written:

[This kind of] generosity is the virtue that produces peace, as the sutras say. Generosity is a practice which overcomes our acquisitiveness and self-absorption, and which benefits others.¹⁷

In this way, *dana-paramita* proves to be crucial for Buddhists doing pastoral care and counseling in a religiously plural context . . .

I, a chaplain intern, sit in the room of a young male graduate student who has recently been in a car accident. I'm not assigned to his floor, but the pastoral care department put us together thinking that he might like to talk to another young male graduate student.

We talk about the accident. He's struggling to make meaning of this accident, even though he knows that his is not the first car accident at that horrible, complicated intersection. I invite him to tell me more about what he's thinking. He starts big, telling me about his belief in God—that He is all-knowing, but more importantly all-loving. He believes that everything happens for a reason.

Then he starts talking about the accident. "Is this a punishment? It's punishment, right?" My immediate impression is that this is a good guy, and here he is, this poor good guy, wracking his brain for reasons why God would put him through a car accident as retribution.

This is a classic, textbook case of why professional chaplaincy can be hard on Buddhist chaplains. Most professional chaplains hail from the Abrahamic faiths, and quite a lot of patient concerns revolve around the beliefs and worldviews of those traditions.

Not much of what this young man is saying resonates with me personally. I could reach for the things from my own tradition that help me. I could try to dispel the notions I hear that have not served me personally. But that's not right. It's not care.

¹⁷ Judith Simmer-Brown, "The Crisis of Consumerism," Mountains and Rivers Order of Zen Buddhism, accessed January 9, 2010, <http://www.mro.org/mr/archive/21-3/articles/crisisofcon.html>.

What can I give this young man that really benefits him? I wonder. I come back to that most fundamental, most important, of chaplaincy skills: listening. There's a disparity I can hear in what he's saying. Perhaps if I reflect that back . . .

"I heard you say before that God is all-loving," I say.

"Yes. He loves everybody. He doesn't hate anybody."

"He loves them just as they are. He's not a judgmental, spiteful God?" I ask.

"No. Not at all. I don't believe it when people say God's like that. That's wrong. God is love."

"So then does God love everybody but you? Why would an all-loving God punish you, but love everything else in creation?"

He's gob-smacked. Clearly this loophole in his thinking has never occurred to him before.

"You know, I never noticed that . . ." he says, looking back at me, his eyes moistening.

"If God is love, I'm pretty sure that includes you too."

I can see that he's really hearing this, and that it's affecting him—benefiting him.

This is *dana-paramita*, I think. It's like this.

The third yana, the *Vajrayana* (or, Adamantine Vehicle), is the most difficult to talk about in many ways. As Reginald A. Ray writes, "In *Vajrayana* Buddhism, we are directed toward pure relative truth through the language of symbol. The [specific] symbolic language that is used in the *Vajrayana* to suggest the actual way in which the world appears is that of the *mandala*, 'sacred circle.'"¹⁸ There are many abstruse explanations of *mandala* and the principle to be gleaned from it. For me, though, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's description of the *mandala* principle as "orderly chaos" is most helpful. "It is orderly because it comes in a pattern," he writes. "It is chaos, because it is confusing to work with in that order."¹⁹ I understand this in two ways. First, the *mandala* principle is a way of making sense of our relative experience of *samsara* and *nirvana*, building on everything that has come before it in the context of the three yana journey. Just as there are distinct ways of relating to *samsara* and *nirvana* in the *Shravakayana* and the *Mahayana*—in the *Shravakayana*, we try to understand and uproot our destructive habitual patterns, and, in the *Mahayana*, we cultivate *bodhicitta*—so too are the methods distinct

¹⁸ Simmer-Brown, "The Crisis of Consumerism."

¹⁹ Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Orderly Chaos: The Mandala Principle* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 3.



in the *Vajrayana*. The *mandala* is the *Vajrayana* mode of organizing or systematizing the various and interconnected manifestations of wisdom and neurosis in ourselves and in the relative world. In a sense, it is in itself a profound teaching on buddha-nature. It shows us the inherently awakened quality of the seemingly chaotic relative world, as well as demonstrates the wisdom aspects of neurotic qualities of mind. The *Vajrayana* teaches us that some of our trouble comes from our attempts (in gross and subtle ways) to solidify that which is intangible—what Ray defines as “the ultimate truth of the emptiness or non-substantiality of phenomena, and of pure relative truth, pure appearance, ineffable phenomena, arising in a relational mode, based on causes and conditions.”²⁰ Because the phenomenal world of pure appearance is beyond the scope of our traditional understanding, a new way of communicating about this experience is needed—hence the *mandala*.

Second, I understand Rinpoche’s comments as pointing toward tantric practice, a unique new method of practice on the three *yana* journey. While the *yanas* are certainly interconnected, continuously developing and clarifying the wisdom of one another in a reflexive sort of way, they are nonetheless progressive—each building on the wisdom of the *yanas* that precede it, as well the progressive turnings of the Wheel of Dharma. Thus, the practitioner’s work evolves from *yana* to *yana* . Ray explains: “Having attained some fruition in the [Shravakayana] and having trained in the *Mahayana* through taking the *bodhisattva* vow and practicing the *paramitas* , the tantric practitioner aims to fulfill his or her *bodhisattva* commitment through a path of yoga, meditation, and retreat practice.”²¹

Core competencies

In terms of a profile of wisdom in spiritual care by identifying core competencies—attitudes, knowledge, and skills—that define professional excellence, I would like to use a rubric introduced by Judith Simmer-Brown. It is her list of the six qualities of a spiritual friend in terms of the *Vajrayana* tradition.²² In the more than five years since I encountered these teachings, they have continued to be instructive for me as I have “taken my seat” as a spiritual caregiver and counselor.

²⁰ Reginald A. Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2002), 129.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²² Introduced in class on March 15, 2005, and inspired in part by textual sources in the *Vajrayana* tradition.

The person is dedicated to your awakening—they tell you the truth

As lay Buddhist ministers, my colleagues in the International Order of Buddhist Ministers and I are neither monastics nor formal teachers *per se*. Though we are often asked to teach and always do so when asked, our ministries are primarily about service—benefiting others however we can, from sweeping a floor to teaching dharma, and everything in between. Though the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California often speaks of us as being like historic *upasakas* , I see us as having more in common with the lineage of dharma protectors. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche said of members of Shambhala International’s “Vajra Guard,” so we could say of the Council’s Buddhist ministers: “Your role is maintaining the strength and dignity in a situation, making sure that, when the buddhadharma is presented, it is presented in a proper atmosphere, a clear atmosphere.”²³ Given the interfaith nature of chaplaincy work, this might be translated to mean that we must carefully tune in to the needs of others—always seeking to truly understand them on their own terms as best we can, and be of benefit by helping them draw strength, inspiration, and guidance from their own beliefs and values. This is certainly a guiding principle for me both in chaplaincy and in my work as a pastoral educator.

In both higher education and ministry, another important part of communicating with those we serve is responding in genuine, sometimes very direct ways to what we discover—“telling the truth.” Trungpa Rinpoche again: “If there are lots of clouds in front of the sun, your duty is to create wind so that the clouds can be removed and the clear sun can shine.”²⁴ This, to me, is what being a good chaplain and a good professor is all about—serving others collectively and individually in such a way that “the sun can shine.” Dr. Simmer-Brown once used a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote with us in the *Vajrayana* Texts class that I have found valuable in negotiating the critical work of the chaplain and the teacher: “Criticism should not be querulous and wasting, all knife and root-puller, but guiding, instructive, inspiring, a south wind, not an east wind.”²⁵ Being authentic, truthful, is the only way you can “create wind”; how skillfully you can direct it depends on the quality of one’s practice, which brings me to . . .

²³ Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *True Command: The Teachings of the Dorje Kazing* (Holtfax: Trident Publishing, 2005), 62.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁵ William Henry Gilman, ed., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 88.

As a Buddhist minister, chaplain, and professor of chaplaincy/Buddhist theology, it is essential for me to maintain a daily practice and general "spiritual fitness." For me, this means primarily (and at the absolute minimum) keeping up with my daily practice of meditation. Obviously, one cannot attend to someone (or even really listen to or communicate genuinely with them) if he or she is not able to be right there in the present moment with that person. And, generally speaking, the people with whom one works in the context of chaplaincy will need the chaplain to be able to do this. Mindfulness meditation practice in particular is a way of cultivating an awareness of what is happening in our experience moment-to-moment. According to the Buddha himself, one who is well established in mindfulness has the following qualities:

There is the case where a monk, a disciple of the noble ones, is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. He remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in & of themselves . . . the mind in & of itself . . . mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—putting aside greed & distress with reference to the world.²⁶

In this practice, we typically sit on a cushion and bring our awareness to our breath. It is learning to meet each moment on its own terms, without running away from it or trying to manipulate it or change it. It is training our mind to be present, to be there with what is. At the same time, though, we are careful to avoid the traps of samsaric mind. Trungpa Rinpoche once again:

If you try to domesticate your mind through meditation—try to possess it by holding onto the meditative state—the clear result will be regression on the path, with a loss of freshness and spontaneity. . . . You focus your attention on the object of awareness, but then, in the same moment, you disown that awareness and go on. What is needed here is some sense of confidence—confidence that you do not have to securely own your mind, but that you can tune into its process spontaneously.²⁷

²⁶ "Indriya-vibhanga Sutta: Analysis of the Mental Faculties," trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight*, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn48/sn48.010.than.html>.

²⁷ Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, "The Four Foundations of Mindfulness," *Shambhala*, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.shambhala.org/teachers/vctr/fourfoundations.html>.

Even a little bit of this training is beneficial in the context of chaplaincy; one of the natural results of this practice is that the practitioner is able to relate to his or her experience, and those of others, with much greater authenticity and a deeper sense of awareness. Of course, whether it is mindfulness meditation, prayer, psychotherapy, arts, sports, all of the above, or something else that gets the chaplain to this point, what is most important is that the chaplain be as fully present as possible.

At my best, I find that the work of the chaplain serves me not only to benefit others but also myself. Offering spiritual care and counseling instructs me further in becoming a truly attentive presence and careful listener in my own life. Done well, it helps me become a more present, grounded person. Indeed, over time I have found that if I want to be a truly positive spiritual presence for others, I have to give myself the gift of self-acceptance. So I come back to the cushion again and again.

They have devotion for their teacher(s)—they are rooted with the lineage

It seems to me that we could talk about at least three kinds of teachers in the Buddhist tradition, broadly speaking. Among these kinds of teachers, as mentioned in the Pali canon, are those in our families of origin:

Mother & father,
compassionate to their family,
are called

Brahma,
first teachers,
those worthy of gifts
from their children.

So the wise should pay them
homage,
honor

with food & drink
clothing & bedding
anointing & bathing
& washing their feet.

Performing these services to their parents,
the wise

are praised right here
and after death
rejoice in heaven.²⁸

²⁸ "Jivuttaka: The Group of Fours," trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight*, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ut/ut.4.100-112.than.html#ut-106>.

Of course, not every person is so fortunate to have had parents worthy of such descriptions and praise. At the very least, there is a lesson to be gleaned here about the importance of family systems work—understanding from where and from whom we have come, and how our strategies for engaging and working with others have been influenced and conditioned by those relational [patterns]. Indeed, as Ronald W. Richardson has written, “past emotional [patterns] of adapting to the intensity of a relationship [continue] to affect and shape the present.”²⁹ As chaplains, we do well then to be cognizant of our familial lineage and appreciate them, inasmuch as they have provided strengths and growing edges for our work in this very moment with others.

The second kind of teachers are those the Buddhist traditions speak of perhaps more frequently than others (and the kind that are almost certainly being referenced specifically with this particular quality): personal spiritual mentors. In all of the Buddhist traditions, one finds a good Buddhist teacher described as being someone who sees all of the student’s strengths and weaknesses, and mirrors those things back to the student—even when it might be uncomfortable or even devastating. Through all of it, though, the student is nurtured and enriched in the best possible ways. As Lama Ken McLeod has written:

When we start exploring the mystery of being, we are still mired in habituated patterns. Limited in perception to a world projected by these patterns, we do not and cannot see things as they are. We need a person, a teacher, who, standing outside our projected world, can show us how to proceed.³⁰

Though the relationship is often quite challenging and difficult, the student should be experiencing support and growth on the path, inspiring a deep appreciation for the teacher. As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche has said so well, the student comes to recognize that “no matter what circumstances arise, the compassionate kindness of the spiritual teacher will never forsake [the student]. . . . The spiritual master is like the earth, never giving way beneath [their] feet.”³¹

Third, and lastly, are all those around me. Bhante Chao Chu often tells

²⁹ Ronald W. Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor’s Own Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 14.

³⁰ Ken McLeod, *Wake Up to Your Life: Discovering the Buddhist Path of Attention* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2001), 6.

³¹ Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *The Hundred Verses of Advice: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on What Matters Most*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2006), 44.

us that as Buddhist ministers we have a responsibility to serve and support the Buddhist community widely. Key to this, he says, is truly accepting others for who they are, not merely tolerating their differences. Explicit here is an attention to Buddhist ecumenicism; implicit, I think, is the suggestion of even wider, interfaith cooperation. My teacher is asking us with our training as ministers to be open and receptive and grateful for the teachers who will be put in our paths whenever we are with others. In addition, as another one of my precious teachers, Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, has written: “Appreciate other beings with this attitude: ‘With the help of these beings, I can develop the precious enlightened attitude, *bodhichitta*. With the help of these beings, I can progress toward Buddhahood. The fact that it is possible for me to train in the six *paramitas*, in the four means of magnetizing and so forth, and in the vast activities of a bodhisattva, is only possible because of other beings—so, thank you very much!’”³² As a Buddhist, I must recognize all sentient beings as my teachers and cultivate gratefulness for them and the teachings that they offer.

They work with people whether they are “good” or “bad”

On the surface, this quality carries with it an instruction about working with all kinds of people: the privileged, the oppressed, the virtuous, the iniquitous, and so on. I strive to do this in my work as a Buddhist minister and chaplain, and to contribute in my own very small ways to opening higher education up in such a way that it might be available to more than just those with certain social advantages. There is also a special teaching here for those who do chaplaincy, I think. As my friend, fellow Naropa alumnus and prison chaplain Karuna Thompson often says, “The chaplain is the conscience of the institution he or she serves.” Chaplains help foster and facilitate community. In order to do this effectively, they must learn to understand various perspectives—perspectives that can often be in direct conflict. As a chaplain committed to community-building, I know that I need to try to work with everyone, “whether they are ‘good’ or ‘bad.’”

Obviously, this lesson has applications for teachers as well. As the director of the particular program for which I work, I am acutely aware of the need for our students to be presented with a range of ideas and viewpoints. For me, this diversity of perspectives takes the form of not just the material but also the other professors and the student cohorts. In this way, each individual student learns to work with all kinds of people, including those who think just like they do and those who think in

³² Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, *Present Fresh Wakefulness: A Meditation Manual on Nonconceptual Wisdom* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004), 75.

almost the completely opposite way. Again, as Trungpa Rinpoche says, "The challenge of warriorship is to live fully in the world as it is and to find within this world, with all its paradoxes, the essence of nowness. If we open our eyes, if we open our minds, if we open our hearts, we will find that this world is a magical place. It is not magical because it tricks us or changes unexpectedly into something else, but it is magical because it can BE so vividly, so brilliantly."³³

They have bodhicitta—relative and absolute

In many ways, I think the less said here, the better—it is probably more than a bit presumptuous for each of us to speak about how well we have cultivated and developed the mind of enlightenment. I think our teachers, as well as our students and the others we serve, are best suited to do that. In terms of how I understand this quality in my roles and responsibilities as a Buddhist minister, chaplain, and pastoral educator, though, I return often to a teaching by Burma's Nobel Peace Prize-winning democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi:

As a Buddhist, if you really want to consider what we, as human beings, are here for it's quite simple: we are trying to achieve enlightenment and use the wisdom that is gained to serve others, so that they too might be free from suffering. While we can't all be Buddhas, I feel a responsibility to do as much as I can to realize enlightenment to the degree that I can, and to use it to relieve the suffering of others.³⁴

They do not have money as a consideration

This is perhaps the most straightforward quality, and part of the code of conduct for those of us ordained as ministers by the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California: we offer our services freely. Professional chaplains, of course, are generally salaried. There is, however, a more general operating principle to be drawn from this particular teaching, and it is this: be available to others. Obviously, as a chaplain, one needs a healthy sense of boundaries and the skills for good self-care, but spiritual care and counseling work should be more than just jobs for the practitioner. With this in mind, I myself try not to avoid those relatively small acts of responsibility and/or generosity that may arise by saying things

³³ Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2007), 147–48.

³⁴ Alan Clements, ed., *The Voice of Hope: Aung San Suu Kyi Conversations with Alan Clements* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 195.

like "It is not in my job description" or "I am not on the clock." Trungpa Rinpoche again, to close: "If you are a warrior, decency means that you are not cheating anybody at all. . . . Decency is the absence of strategy. It is of utmost importance to realize that the warrior's approach should be simple-minded sometimes, very simple and straightforward. That makes it very beautiful: you having nothing up your sleeve; therefore a sense of genuineness comes through. That is decency."³⁵

Conclusion

"To be human is to interact with other people," writes Buddhist practitioner and psychologist Karen Kessel-Wigela in her wonderful book *How to Be a Help Instead of a Nuisance*.³⁶ She continues:

Many times as we relate to others—both those we know well and count as friends and those we may never have seen before—the desire to be helpful arises in our hearts. In a way, nothing is more simple or basic, yet many times we don't know how to go about it. We may want to help, to extend comfort, support, intelligent help, but we don't know what to do.³⁷

With its attention of identifying and addressing stress, dissatisfaction, suffering, and difficulty as clearly and carefully as possible, and identifying and cultivating beneficial qualities of body, speech, and mind with as much clarity and care, Buddhism offers those working in spiritual care and counseling inestimably valuable tools for "being a help instead of a nuisance." Above we have seen how each of the three *yanas* lays groundwork, sets a path, and provides a vision of fruition in terms of relating not just to others but also to ourselves.

It is perhaps not so surprising, then, that one senior chaplain colleague from another religious tradition once said to me and some of my colleagues whom she was impressed with, "What took you Buddhists so long to get to this whole professional chaplaincy party? With teaching and training like this in your traditions, it's no surprise that you're all so adept at this." Certainly Buddhist practitioners entering the fields of professional spiritual care and counseling are coming in with understandings

³⁵ Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, from "Perkiness," a talk given to the Directors of Shambhala Training, July 1978, available at the Shambhala Publications Blog, accessed November 16, 2010, <http://live.shambhala.com/decency-is-absence-of-strategy>.

³⁶ Karen Kessel-Wigela, *How to Be a Help Instead of a Nuisance: Practical Approaches to Giving Support, Service, and Encouragement to Others* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

and skills that are going to serve them, their colleagues, and their patients incredibly well. Just being with what is, not turning away from suffering, reconciling dichotomies, etc.—these are things you must have to do this work, and they've already put in a lot of work on them as Buddhist practitioners. While the fields of spiritual care and counseling can learn much from the influx of Buddhist chaplains, Buddhist chaplains too can learn much from the different approaches and ideas they will encounter in their colleagues and patients. By such openness and mutual learning, we can surely go farther in our work as spiritual caregivers and counselors. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said, "If a harmonious relationship is established amongst societies and religious beliefs in today's multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural world, then it will surely set a very good example for others."¹⁸

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¹⁸ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, from "Religious Harmony," a talk given to the International Association for Religious Freedom, Ladakh Group, August 2011, available at the website of the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, accessed November 16, 2010, <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/religious-harmony>.