Meditation Is Not Enough

Wakoh Shannon Hickey

My pager goes off in the middle of the night, and I am called to the neonatal intensive care unit. A stillborn child has been delivered. The parents, Roman Catholics who speak no English, want the baby baptized. Catholic priests are not permitted to baptize dead bodies, but the priests of the local parish understand parents' emotional need for the rite, so they do not object to hospital chaplains performing the rite. I'm the chaplain on call, so the task falls to me. Reading a liturgy in Spanish, I lead family members in a traditional Catholic rite of emergency baptism, sprinkling holy water on the lifeless forehead of a tiny girl. *Yo te bautizo en el nombre de el Padre, y el Hijo, y el Espiritu Santo.* It's not my first time. The parents invariably ask: "Why did God do this? Is He punishing me?" How does a Buddhist chaplain answer that?

On another call, a lifelong Jehovah's Witness is bleeding out in the emergency room. Surgery involving blood transfusions would be necessary to

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repair his aneurism and save his life, but the doctrine of his church forbids transfusions from donors, because they are believed to violate the Biblical prohibition against consuming blood. If he were at a hospital near his home, he could use "banked" units of his own blood, but he and his wife are far from home. The wife is in denial. My job is to help her say goodbye in the minutes remaining, help him die with some measure of calm, and find someone at the local Kingdom Hall who can accompany the wife as she arranges to have her husband's body transported home. She asks me to pray, but in my zendo, we never do extemporaneous prayer. From somewhere beyond me, a prayer to Jehovah emerges from my lips. The moment I stop speaking, the man flatlines.

A Mormon woman is suicidal over her siblings' insistence that she participate in a Temple ritual that will seal her to her family for eternity. She isn't ready. The psychiatrist has no idea how to help her deal with this, so he calls me. Down the hall, a psychotic woman is certain that Jesus wants her to starve herself to death because she is such a terrible sinner. How does the Dharma help me to help these women?

I'm a Soto Zen priest who has worked as a chaplain in both hospital and university settings. Now I teach undergraduates in a rural village in western New York. I have been trained in American Zen temples and in the academy. I have given a lot of thought to what these institutions do—and what they don't do—to help prepare people for religious leadership and service. I'd like to share some of the conclusions I have drawn so far.

Years of zazen practice certainly helped me to approach the situations I describe above—and countless more—with some measure of calm and clarity. I found my way in each case, and each time I learned something new about the Buddha's teaching of no separate self. But zazen alone was not enough to help me navigate through the theological issues that each case presented, and zazen alone could not help me respond to the agonized questions that people asked me.

These are the kinds of situations chaplains deal with every day. They were not contemplated by the Buddha 2,500 years ago, when he and his disciples wandered across north India, begging for alms. Nor were they contemplated by Dogen, the thirteenth-century founder of my Zen lineage, when he established his monastery in the mountains of Japan.

The work of ministers, priests, and chaplains—Buddhist or otherwise—is always interpretive: we must continually make ancient traditions and teachings relevant to new cultural and historical contexts. In the religiously pluralistic situation of twenty-first-century North America, we must also collaborate with and serve people whose religious perspectives differ hugely from our own. While I believe meditation training is essential to the preparation of Buddhist chaplains, it is not enough. Additional tools are needed for the job.

During my own preparation for ordination as a priest, and my training as a chaplain, I spent six years in seminary, earning a master's degree in Buddhist and Christian studies and a master of divinity degree. (I also spent six months in cloistered monastic training.) Academic training was not a requirement for ordination in the Zen lineage with which I was affiliated at the time, but I believed that if I were to take on the responsibilities and authority of priesthood, I needed training that American Zen communities are not fully equipped to provide. I had practiced Soto Zen for nearly fifteen years, in both residential and nonresidential settings, before I entered graduate school, and had observed that the training of American Zen priests consisted of meditation, participation in rituals, and informal (i.e., nonacademic) study of Buddhist texts and history. I had also witnessed a number of scandals involving clergy misconduct, both in my own lineage and in other Buddhist organizations. I wanted to study both Buddhism and Christianity academically, and I wanted professional training to help me avoid some of the pitfalls of religious leadership.

I entered graduate school in 1997, and in the years since then, I have seen huge shifts in seminary education. The mainstream model of clergy education—a three-year, residential master of divinity program—dates to the nineteenth century, and does not work as well as it once did. Seminarians these days are older; many are second-career professionals with families who have more difficulty relocating for graduate school than young, single people do. Mainstream Protestant denominations are also shrinking, and have less money to support seminarians, while the cost of graduate education has dramatically increased. Schools find it very costly to maintain aging buildings, upgrade libraries, incorporate new research and classroom technologies, offer competitive salaries, etc. In response

to such changes, seminaries are developing new models of education, as will be discussed below.

Everything is changing, as the Buddha taught. And to use a modern metaphor, we must either learn to surf the waves of change, or sink.

My master's thesis—which was longer than my doctoral dissertation—examined a number of issues in the training of American Zen clergy. I studied the functions priests perform, and the ways they are trained, in three American Zen lineages, which ranged along a spectrum from highly monastic to nonmonastic. I compared the training in these communities to the typical training path of Soto Zen priests in Japan and to seminary education in the American Protestant mainstream. I considered the differing roles of Japanese and American Zen priests: in Japan, they are best known for performing culturally prescribed funeral and memorial services. In the American organizations I studied, three of the largest Zen communities in the United States, priests were typically called upon to do four things, which are normal expectations for mainstream Christian clergy as well. First, their religious communities expected them to be exemplars: that is, representative practitioners of their Zen traditions. (Clergy have feet of clay, of course, but in general we are expected to uphold the ideals of the traditions we practice, in a public way.) Second, they were ritual leaders: they performed various rites of passage and the regular liturgies of their traditions and improvised other ceremonies as circumstances required. Third, they were religious educators and public theologians, teaching the texts, stories, and disciplines of their traditions and reinterpreting them for new circumstances. Finally, they provided what Christians call pastoral care: they helped people grapple with questions of meaning during times of struggle and offered spiritual and ethical guidance. However, I found significant gaps between these role expectations and the formal training of American Zen priests and lay teachers. In all three organizations, training tended to focus on meditation and ritual, and frequently left leaders underprepared for the roles of religious educator, public theologian, or pastoral counselor.

Since my seminary days, as I have watched Buddhist, Christian, and Jewish colleagues move into various forms of professional ministry, I have come to realize that they also do many more things than I had considered in my master's thesis. They manage staff, budgets, and volunteers

in the nonprofit organizations they serve. They work with boards of directors and government agencies. They do fundraising, publicity, and community organizing. And many operate in an American religious culture that blurs the line between clergy and laity. Although chaplaincy is a unique form of ministry, because it is explicitly ecumenical and interfaith, and because it takes place in institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and schools, chaplains are nevertheless called upon to perform many of these complex and demanding tasks as well.

For some years, I have participated in discussions about clergy training within the Soto Zen Buddhist Association (SZBA), a fledgling professional organization for American Zen clergy. I also have participated in many conversations, in person and online, with Buddhist chaplains and aspiring chaplains. It seems to me that participants in these Buddhist discussions fall into two broad camps.

Many—perhaps a majority—are what I would call monastically oriented, even if they live as laypeople. They believe that training for religious leadership and service should be centered in the meditation hall. Many argue that Zen training should consist primarily of daily meditation, liturgy, and temple work, particularly in traditional, ninety-day periods of intensive practice called *ango*. Some monastically oriented people express suspicion or disdain for academic training and professional certification, arguing that it can hinder religious insight, while others are much more supportive of formal study, in academic or temple settings, even as they stress the primacy of temple practice and long apprenticeship with one's Zen teacher.

Folks approaching the issue of chaplaincy training from the other side, including the organizations that certify professional chaplains, advocate a professional model of training. This includes a master of divinity degree or its equivalent. At the seminary I attended, that meant at least two years of coursework and a year of internship. In coursework, students learned to interpret scriptures critically, think theoretically and theologically, preach sermons, analyze congregational systems, do historical and ethnographic research, grapple with legal and ethical problems, and so forth.

Many of these academic and theological skills are essential for professional chaplains. In 2006 the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC), the largest and most influential certifying body for professional

chaplains, decided that Buddhists seeking to become board certified chaplains—the highest level of professional certification, and necessary for employment in many settings—would be required to hold a bachelor's degree from an institution accredited by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and to document the equivalent of 72 units (7,200 hours) of graduate-level training in each of nine areas: sacred literature, theology/philosophy, ritual/liturgy, religious history, comparative religions, religious education, institutional organization and administration, pastoral care and counseling, and spiritual formation. Up to 1,500 hours of meditation and/or chanting experience could apply to the 7,200-hour total, but only if it involved documented supervision, an educational component, and evaluation to determine whether educational objectives were being met.

In addition, all candidates for APC Board Certification must complete four units (1,600 hours) of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at an accredited training site; be ordained or otherwise commissioned for ministry involving pastoral care; be endorsed as a chaplain by "a recognized religious faith group"; and have 2,000 hours of work experience as a chaplain, after completing CPE. These are rigorous standards, which I believe are appropriate for people serving vulnerable populations such as hospital patients, students, and inmates.

Both monastic and professional training are designed to instill certain ways of thinking, to shape character and identity, and to teach particular skills. I am a product of both kinds of education, and I can see the merits of both. I can also see some limitations of both.

One advantage of Zen monastic training is that one learns Dharma with the whole body. One moves, sits, chants as a member of the group body, dropping the self and harmonizing with others. This (ideally) helps to cultivate both character and religious insight. The rituals of Soto Zen *are* its primary pedagogical method. Long hours of meditation also teach one to be present with suffering, without trying to escape it, or justify it, or "fix" it, or explain it away. This quality, which chaplains call "non-anxious presence," is what suffering people need: someone who can be with them compassionately in the midst of their suffering. The only way to be fully present with anyone else's suffering, without squirming, is to practice being present with one's own. This ability to be fully present in

the moment is one of the great gifts that Buddhist chaplains offer. It is not a skill typically taught in seminaries.

I think this kind of monastic formation is at the heart of the famous aphorism attributed to Bodhidharma: Zen is "a special transmission outside the sutras, not dependent upon words and letters, a direct pointing to the human mind, seeing one's true nature and becoming Buddha." There is no way to learn it but to do it, in year after year of patient practice. In this, I agree with monastically oriented Zen Buddhists.

At the same time, Dogen, the founder of my own Zen lineage, called this aphorism a "fallacy" and fiercely criticized those who used it to argue that Zen training need not entail rigorous study. In a treatise called "Buddha's Teaching" (*Bukkyo*), Dogen wrote:

> Fellows like this, even hundreds or thousands of years ago, were proclaiming themselves to be leading authorities; but we should know that, if they had such talk as this, they neither clarified nor penetrated the Buddha's Dharma and the Buddha's truth.

For Dogen, absolutely everything is Buddha and preaches the Dharma—so to call scholarly study "outside" the Buddha's teaching is to fundamentally misunderstand the central Mahayana doctrine of nonduality.

Furthermore, throughout Buddhist history, monks and nuns have been responsible for writing, preserving, and commenting upon Buddhist teachings. Educated monks and nuns composed the *nikayas*, *agamas*, and *vinayas*, the philosophical and psychological treatises, and the transmission stories unique to Zen known as koans. Until recently, meditation was the specialty of a few monks and nuns. Even in modern Japanese Soto Zen, formal education can and does substitute for some monastic training. The more academic training one has in Buddhist studies, the less time one is required to spend in a recognized training monastery (*senmon sodo*) in order to move through the ordination ranks. Clergy receive both monastic ranks (novice priest, head trainee, full priest, abbot or abbess of a temple) and academic ranks, which determine what and where a priest can teach other priests or laypeople.

I think the American Zen emphasis on personal religious experience

and intuition, "heart" over "mind," is not so much a product of ancient Zen as it is a product of *American* religious history—specifically, of evangelical Protestantism since the early nineteenth century. Evangelicalism shifted religious authority away from clergy who gave learned expositions of scripture toward those who could testify to powerful, personal religious experiences (e.g., being "born again")—including those who were not formally ordained. Likewise, German Romanticism, which influenced Transcendentalists and other early promoters of Buddhism among white Americans, stressed intuition rather than rationalism. Although mainstream American denominations do require academic training for clergy, American religious culture has been shaped decisively by what John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, called "the religion of the heart."

In order to reinterpret religious traditions of the past, to keep them relevant for present realities, we must understand where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are headed. Our historical and cultural situation is vastly different from those of our spiritual ancestors, at home and abroad. Different circumstances call for different skills. Professional seminary training is no panacea, but it does offer some useful training for our time.

For example, seminaries teach people to read sacred literature critically, and to interpret it for new circumstances. Even Biblical studies can help Buddhists understand a key source of religious authority for a majority of Americans and can help us learn to read any scriptures, including Buddhist ones, more thoughtfully. In some ways, modern Biblical studies are far ahead of Buddhist studies, particularly in English. For Biblical studies, a broad range of exegetical tools are available in English: myriad translations, commentaries from a wide range of perspectives, concordances, etc. Few such tools are available to English-speaking Buddhists, and only a fraction of the vast corpus of Buddhist literature has yet been translated from Asian languages into English (although the Pali Canon has been available in English since the 1920s). Biblical scholars have developed a wide variety of hermeneutical methods for analyzing scriptures from multiple angles as well: historical, literary, cultural, rhetorical, feminist/womanist/*mujerista*, and so forth, which Buddhist scholars can (and some do) employ.

Furthermore, many of the people Buddhist chaplains encounter in their work have been wounded by the toxic theologies of fundamentalists who read the Bible selectively and superficially. These theologies can worsen the suffering of people who are ill, grieving, or incarcerated, and countering them requires theological training and skill.

In addition, professional education can guide chaplains in dealing with legal and ethical problems that arise in counseling situations, and in making appropriate referrals to agencies dealing with problems such as domestic violence, addiction, sexual abuse, or suicide. Such skills are essential for chaplains and other religious professionals.

Another valuable aspect of formal theological education is that it obliges one to discuss one's own religious assumptions with people who do not share them. Exposure to people of different religious and cultural backgrounds can help one clarify where one stands and relate more empathetically to those who stand elsewhere. This combination of personal clarity and openness to difference is an essential pastoral skill.

But seminary education is expensive, for both students and schools. Many people who would like to be ministers or chaplains cannot afford to relocate for three years of graduate school, then enter jobs paying moderately at best in a very limited market. Given the relationship between race and economic class, these problems are especially acute for people of color.

Similar problems apply to extended monastic training—a complaint my American Zen peers repeatedly raise. Most Zen clergy must support themselves financially, and it is difficult to leave one's job and home for several months of *ango* training. Even in Japan, monastic training is increasingly problematic, because the medieval monastic ideal is not well adapted to the needs of modern, urban temple families or the parishioners they serve. Both monastic and professional modes of training also pluck people out of the contexts of their ministry and reinforce a split between theory and practice, clergy and laity, that may no longer serve. We must adapt to these realities.

These problems are pushing some seminaries to experiment with new models of education. Some are partnering with secular institutions to teach skills such as nonprofit management, in addition to the traditional subjects of theology, scripture, religious history, ethics, pastoral care,

and preaching. Some are pooling resources and collaborating with other seminaries instead of competing. Increasingly, seminaries are offering nondegree certificate programs, and combinations of online teaching, distance education, and short-term residential intensives. These methods can also serve Buddhists well, and a few organizations are beginning to experiment with them. We just have to be willing to engage in the necessary conversations: between scholars and practitioners, among Buddhists of different types, and across religious lines.

This is how we cultivate *upaya paramita*, the perfection of skillful means.

Upaya means discerning what a particular person or situation requires and responding appropriately, so that we can all move together along the path to awakening. I cannot think of a better description of what a Zen priest or a chaplain does.