

# A Proposed Foundation for Buddhist Chaplaincy

A provisional investigation of the threefold purity (trimaṇḍalaparīśuddha) in relation to the chaplaincy role and the personal experiences of a novice Buddhist chaplain

Fredrik Liland

Mastergradsoppgave lederskap, etikk og samtalepraksis  
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Det teologiske fakultet

Veileder: Førsteamanuensis Kaia Rønsdal



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## i. Abstract

The thesis proposes, through empirical and autoethnographic explorations, how the practice of Buddhist chaplaincy may be given a theoretical footing in Mahayana Buddhist philosophy through the concept of “threefold purity” (*trimaṇḍalaparīśuddha*). This idea, which states that the ideal interplay between two individuals can be realised when the regular subject-object dichotomy disintegrates, describes the manner in which the bodhisattva step-by-step develops their virtuous training in an increasingly transcendent direction, the goal being the completely non-dual activity of a buddha. It is suggested that this framework, which describes a relationship of complete empathy and suggests a path towards that, illustrates part of what the particular Buddhist approach to chaplaincy is. It may also serve as a model for how to approach care practices in general. The concept is introduced and discussed in light of the present field of Buddhist chaplaincy, as well as in relation to the role of the author who draws on his own experiences as research material.

## ii. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo for offering the Leadership, Ethics and Chaplaincy master's programme (LES), and especially express my gratitude to Professor Anne Hege Grung and Associate Professor Kaia Rønsdal, who have been my main teachers, for their patience and excellent advice throughout my studies. I would also like to thank my fellow students who experienced the difficult circumstances of studying during the Covid-19 pandemic. You were all inspirational. Lastly, I give thanks to my family who has supported me and helped me not to give up on my studies even though it became a prolonged and at times difficult experience.

### iii. A note on Sanskrit and Tibetan terminology

When technical terminology are translated from one language into another, or from one context into another, there is always a danger of confusion or misinterpretation. For this reason I will be providing Buddhist terminology in Sanskrit, the most generally accepted technical language of Buddhism, and when appropriate also in Tibetan seeing that much of what is here treated has historically been conveyed to us through this language. For Sanskrit, I will be using the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST); for Tibetan, the Wylie transliteration system that is becoming the one most widely used internationally (See Wylie, 1959). To aid the reading of those not familiar with Sanskrit transliteration, the letters *ś* and *ṣ* may both be pronounced *sh*. Vowels with diacritic lines above are pronounced with double length. *Trimaṇḍalapariśuddha* may be pronounced “tri-mandala-parishuddha”.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Theoretical foundation: a Mahayana Buddhist ideal

This paper aims to investigate dialogue from a Buddhist perspective. I wish to suggest a normative model for Buddhist dialogue, and consider which practical implications this may have when employed in the setting of care practices such as for instance Buddhist chaplaincy. The normative part will present a particular Mahayana Buddhist ideal which may apply to any type of interaction with other individuals or activities, namely the “threefold purity” (*trimaṇḍalaparīśuddha*). This is a recurring theme both directly and indirectly in many Buddhist scriptures, and I will attempt a description of this “ideal” approach based both on canonical sources as well as more contemporary applications. The question will then be posed of how one may attempt to apply this ideal, and perhaps superhuman, approach to the field of dialogue in general and chaplaincy in particular. What may be the benefits, and is it even possible? My research question is the following:

**How may the theoretical framework of *trimaṇḍalaparīśuddha* inform and strengthen the case for a particular Buddhist chaplaincy, and in turn contribute to the field of chaplaincy and dialogue in general?**

To illustrate this also beyond the sphere of theory, I will consider my own experiences with online chaplaincy and dialogue during the practice period for the MA programme Leadership, Ethics and Chaplaincy (Lederskap, etikk og samtalepraksis; LES) which took place in the Spring of 2020, during the initial phase of the Covid-19 epidemic.

My thesis will focus on the dynamics of the interaction itself, and will not go into detail about other highly relevant topics, such as for instance the ritualistic role a Buddhist chaplain may be expected to embody, or the particular ethical dimensions that Buddhism may bring into the field of chaplaincy. My answer to the above research question will be presented in two main sections, one providing a theoretical approach and the other a description of its practical application. In the first I will present Buddhist chaplaincy, as well as myself and my own approach to the subject, the Buddhist philosophical framework I am suggesting may act

as a foundation for the field, and how this framework may be applied. In the second section I will present my own experiences with applying Buddhist chaplaincy and this particular philosophical idea in practice.

I will begin, though, with the background for this thesis and some considerations about my own role in it, as well as the methodology I will be relying on.

### 1.2 Background: what role does (my) role play?

As I write this I have recently turned forty-four and find myself yet again, despite my advancing age, in the role of a student. I am attempting to conclude a two-year master's programme at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo that I have hoped can play a role as a unifying factor through which all the many experiences I have had up until now could become relevant in forging for me a role as caregiver, perhaps a Buddhist chaplain, in Norway. Much of what I have concerned myself with throughout my studies have been what kind of role a Buddhist chaplain can and/or should have. And as I am now attempting to arrive at a conclusion about what I have learned through this study programme, I believe it will be relevant on several levels to take account of my background and my own role in this.

There are several reasons for this. First of all, how I am approaching the topic is shaped by my background and history. It seems to me the most honest and scientific approach to be upfront about where I am coming from (see section 2.2). Secondly, this will be a theoretical text about role where I propose that there is a particular "Buddhist role" one can have when entering into a relationship of communication (see section 2.4). It will be helpful for the reader to keep in mind that how I present this role is at least in part influenced by my own personal journey of navigating a Buddhist role, both while living and studying in Buddhist institutions in Nepal, and while being involved in the Buddhist community in Norway. Finally, part of my research for this paper is based on my own (limited) experience as a Buddhist dialogue partner, mainly accumulated during the practical part of the programme (see section 3, in general). The context within which this was carried out, both the format, how I presented myself, and the expectations of those I spoke with, will as a matter of course influence how I approach the issue at hand in general, and the conclusions that I draw. It is therefore natural that I reflect on my own approach and role in these encounters as I attempt to let these experiences illustrate how the suggested Buddhist ideal may be implemented in



practice.

In addition, and beyond what my personal role(s) is(/are), I believe that the issue of role in general is essential for the topic under discussion. One could be excused for thinking that *dialogue partner* and *chaplain* are roles that are fairly straightforward and obvious, and that the issue of role-understanding perhaps receives too much attention within the field. I have become convinced that it deserves all the attention it gets as it could be said to govern the entire foundation for how an interaction is established and develops. This is part of the reason it has come to dominate how I have approached my studies in this field, and has shaped the topic I have chosen to focus on for this thesis.

The LES-programme has its origin at the Faculty of Theology, where priests, the traditional chaplains in Norway, have received their education since the University of Oslo was established in 1811. The new programme aims “to make the candidates able to work in interdisciplinary teams and across religious and life stance boundaries, and also to critically evaluate their own and others’ practice as dialogue partners/care workers.”<sup>1</sup> Norwegian society is changing and traditional roles have to change with it, or new ones be created. Although presented in more general terms that may include similar or parallel roles, both religious and secular, the LES programme as I have come to understand it aims to create a space for chaplains and care workers who are not necessarily representatives of Christianity to take up the role a traditional Christian chaplain would have in Norway, such as for instance in hospitals or prisons. There is therefore already a role there, a mould, that others who may not initially fulfil the traditional criteria are now invited to fill. As one of those “others” (Buddhist?, convert?, atheist?, ...) I have perhaps felt that I have to in some sense adapt my Buddhism to fulfil the expectations of such a role, while at the same time feeling that there is much that my tradition can contribute to the role that was perhaps not there in the traditional role. Without wanting to sound dramatic, these are challenging and potentially sensitive issues that might go to the core of what it means to be a representative of a religious tradition.

With this in mind it has been my intent to reach into that core, to some extent, to see if I may find a foundation that a particular Buddhist chaplaincy or dialogue practice may be

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1. University of Oslo. LES master programme presentation. 24/3-2023. <https://www.uio.no/studier/program/les-master/hva-lerer-du/>: “Kandidatene blir i stand til å arbeide tverrfaglig i team og på tvers av tros- og livssynsmessige grenser, samt til å kritisk evaluere egen og andres praksis som samtalepartnere/omsorgsarbeidere.” (My translation)

based upon. And early on in my studies, as I was pondering these issues, I was reminded of the principle of the “threefold purity”. This principle is an explanation or expression of how the bodhisattva, the quintessential Mahayana Buddhist practitioner, should relate to and engage with the virtuous activity for the benefit of others that forms the main part of his or her path towards buddhahood. It is essentially a universal advise for how to engage in any activity so that it becomes without fault and elevates it towards the transcendent sphere of awakening. This seemed to me a good place to start when trying to define a framework for a Buddhist ideal of how to engage with others in dialogue, and it is with this principle as a basis that I attempt to establish Buddhist chaplaincy in a theoretical and philosophical framework (see section 2.3).

Before turning to this particular principle however, I will begin with a general description of the field of Buddhist chaplaincy and discuss where it situates itself within the field of chaplaincy in general (section 2.1). Although Buddhism is an almost 2500 year old tradition, and Buddhists have been engaged in dialogue with and care for the communities within which they have operated throughout this time, the particular field of Buddhist chaplaincy is considered to be a fairly recent phenomenon that has only been defined as such in modern times partly in the context of increased conversion to Buddhism in the West, and in inter-religious dialogue with Christian traditions in particular. I will try to highlight what, if any, Buddhist theoretical principles it has based itself on in its young history.

Finally, as I turn to the practical application of this principle and use my own experiences as an example, I will attempt to connect these two roles, the ideal and the actual, the transcendent and the temporal. It is my hope that this investigation may contribute to the field of Buddhist chaplaincy a theoretical and philosophical foundation that provides for it two new legs: one that may stand firmly within the traditional Mahayana Buddhist principles, and another with which it may then take more confident steps into a field that may then appear a little less alien.

### 1.3 Methodology: philosophy and autoethnography

When I began writing this thesis I instinctively did so in the third person, using the pronoun “we” when referring to who was conducting the investigation. This came natural to me from the training I have had in academic writing, and seemed the best and most scientific way to

approach the subject, which I felt needed the academic distance that makes something “scientific”. My supervisor remarked on my choice and advised me to reflect upon it.

[For all intents and purposes] I am a Buddhist,<sup>2</sup> and the thesis I am writing is about relationship and role from a Buddhist point of view, and based primarily on experiences from within what may be understood as Buddhist contexts. The theoretical aspect I am bringing into my discussion is a Buddhist philosophical-religious concept that concerns this from a broader perspective, an ideal although quite specifically concerning the relationship between the Mahayana Buddhist practitioner and those he or she interacts with, it may (or indeed should) potentially affect any activity the practitioner engages in. My choice of topic is therefore not a coincidence. It is a concept and a practice that I have had an intimate relationship with (consciously and not) throughout the almost twenty-five years I have identified with Buddhism and Buddhist training. I have previously received quite extensive training in Buddhist history, philosophy, epistemology and philology, both from within the tradition and from an academic point of view, and will draw in part on all of these experiences in the present discussion. In particular I will refer to original Sanskrit sources when describing and explaining what the concept of *threefold purity* is, so as to ground this within orthodox Mahayana philosophy, before showing how this may be implemented in the context of Buddhist dialogue and chaplaincy in particular.

But as my supervisor was alluding to, I myself am a part of this investigation. This has to do with my background and reasons for entering into this project, my role in the Buddhist community in Norway and participant in the development of Buddhist chaplaincy, and in particular the way I use my own experiences both in the field work I conducted and in my ruminations about what a Buddhist chaplain essentially is and how they should approach their task. These are in many ways deeply personal issues that I believe it is preferable to be honest about. In fact, I believe it will be useful, if not highly beneficial, that I include myself, my role(s) and my development throughout the project to illustrate the issues with respect to role and relationship that a Buddhist chaplain may face. And to help me organise and think about

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2. Buddhists are in my experience (sometimes to an annoying extent) interested in classification and identity, and seeing that in many ways the “greatest sin” in Buddhism is to be attached to one’s identity, it might not be easy for a Buddhist to admit to being one. This is another element that may affect the idea of role and relationship within Buddhist chaplaincy.

this approach I will borrow ideas about approaches and terminology from the field of autoethnography.

As described in Ellis and Bochner “[a]utoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations.”<sup>3</sup> My thesis is in a sense an experiment where I myself am both researcher and the researched, observing how my background (Buddhist) and role (chaplain) come into play in combination with a proposed theoretical ideal (threefold purity) as I seek to create and situate myself within a role (Buddhist chaplain) that is first and foremost personal, but may inform the generic role as well and thereby have general implications. Although I am seeking to capture what distinguishes a Buddhist chaplain from any other type of chaplain, I am also attempting to propose a way or technique for the Buddhist chaplain to situate themselves in and approach a dialogue situation. My main research material, apart from the theoretical considerations, will therefore be the personal experiences I make throughout the process of both engaging with dialogue partners, as well as while thinking about dialogue and role throughout my process of writing. I will, as Butz and Besio suggests, attempt to maintain a “sensitivity to the autoethnographic characteristics of what [I] learn from research participants as well as to [my] own situatedness in relation to the people and worlds [I] am studying,”<sup>4</sup> meaning that rather than distancing myself from the research material and process of investigation I will use my own participation as a first-hand witness to what it means to be a Buddhist chaplain.

At the same time, given the nature of the theoretical approach I am suggesting, the autoethnographic framework might prove relevant also for how the actual theory I am proposing might work in practice. As will be further elaborated on below (see section 2.3), the *trimaṇḍalapariśuddha* is a model describing how the subject-object dichotomy is to be transcended when engaging in virtue and relating to others as an ideal Mahayana practitioner. But in essence it is also an ontological description of what reality is actually like when our

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3. Ellis and Bochner (2000: 739)

4. Butz and Besio (2009: 1664)

biases and preconceptions are removed. This Buddhist truth is remarkably similar to how Butz and Besio describe how the autoethnographical approach is coming closer to the reality of things when saying that having such a sensibility “means recognising that clear-cut distinctions among researchers, research subjects and the objects of research are illusory, and that what we call the research field occupies a space between these overlapping categories.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout my considerations I will keep this intriguing similarity in mind as I ponder how Buddhism, autoethnography and Buddhist chaplaincy may inform and and contribute to one another.

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5. Butz and Besio (2009: 1664)

## 2. Chaplaincy and the Buddhist approach

### 2.1 General introduction to chaplaincy, Buddhist chaplaincy, and the role of the caregiver

The question I am asking is in a way what makes Buddhist chaplaincy Buddhist, and I am in this thesis suggesting that the threefold purity may serve as a guiding principle in this regard. To situate the following discussion, I will first provide a short introduction to the field of chaplaincy in general and Buddhist chaplaincy in particular, focussing especially on the relationship between the chaplain and the dialogue partner. Although there may be many dimensions to such a meeting depending for instance on the format and the background of the participants – spiritual, emotional, hierarchical, etc. – much attention has often, as one would expect, been put into considering the dynamics of the meeting itself and how this may be governed by the chaplain’s own understanding of their role and approach when entering into a dialogue. In this section I will make reference to some general and some more specific quotes from authors that I believe will illustrate how the concept of the threefold purity can be a useful tool for Buddhist chaplains engaging in their trade.

Chaplaincy has its roots and history within the Christian tradition. A chaplain is traditionally a member of the Christian clergy, but may often function within and/or be employed by secular institutions, such as hospitals, prisons, etc. In increasingly multi-religious and secular societies questions surrounding the role and service provided by chaplains are becoming more complicated as it is perhaps less obvious how the chaplain may provide care and support for a wider and more diverse group of people. Such questions may indeed be just as relevant within the Christian tradition and among those who share a similar belief in God. In his book on pastoral care, Emmanuel Lartey argues that belief in Christ may and should lead to a sense of care that is universal, and that Christians, as the foreword suggests, “must move beyond simple, mono-cultural, and individualistic notions of care to understand the complex web of care that is expressed wherever people respond to one another with empathy, love, and justice.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, a particular background and belief need not, and should not, be a limitation for a chaplain. Focussing on what unites instead of what divides, a chaplain may provide care and comfort, whether spiritual or not, to anyone

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6. Lartey (2003: 11); from the foreword by Prof. James N. Poling.

who are willing to receive it. For Lartey it is important when entering into such relationships that one recognises that while we are all unique we also have fundamental things in common as human beings. By recognising this, a genuine dialogue can happen.

Although I will mainly use the term *chaplaincy* to refer to the type of practice under discussion, other related terms such as *pastoral care* and *care practice* are used by other authors I make reference to. In the following discussion, these will for all intents and purposes be treated as synonyms unless otherwise stated. In the Norwegian context, where my studies and research have been carried out, the term *chaplaincy* is also often used, as a standard Norwegian translation has not been agreed upon. In the title of the LES-programme the term *samtalepraksis* (lit. “conversation-practice”) is used, but the more descriptive and inclusive term *spiritual and/or existential care (-practice)* is often used to refer to the field in general. In Christian contexts in Norway, the term *sjelesorg* (“pastoral care”, “spiritual care”, or, literally, “caring for the soul”) is often used in Christian contexts.

I will use Lartey’s definition of pastoral care as a starting point for discussing what characterises chaplaincy, and how Buddhist chaplaincy places itself within this field:

*Pastoral care consists of helping activities, participated in by people who recognise a transcendent dimension to human life, which, by the use of verbal or non-verbal, direct or indirect, literal or symbolic modes of communication, aim at preventing, relieving or facilitating persons coping with anxieties. Pastoral care seeks to foster people’s growth as full human beings together with the development of ecologically and socio-politically holistic communities in which all persons may live humane lives.<sup>7</sup>*

Lartey’s definition is in a sense both broad and narrow. Although the term “pastoral” is used, implying at least some connection to the Christian tradition, the rest of the definition describes an activity of care engaged in by someone not necessarily connected to a particular religion or life stance. One could also perhaps interpret “pastoral” in the sense of having a responsibility, whether spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, or otherwise, for a certain group, for example those incarcerated in a prison if one is a prison chaplain. The pastoral

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7. Lartey (2003: 30-31)

carer or chaplain is primarily interested in helping people to cope with difficulties, and to contribute to the growth of people and communities. Lartey's seems like quite a broad definition that could easily include Buddhist chaplains. We can compare this with the description of Buddhist chaplaincy found in Sanford and Michon:

*Buddhist chaplaincy is a profession in which Buddhists with specialized training care for the spiritual needs of suffering individuals (careseekers), typically within non-religious settings such as hospitals, hospices, military, workplaces, or universities.*<sup>8</sup>

This might seem much more narrow than the above definition of pastoral care. To practice Buddhist chaplaincy one needs to be a Buddhist, and one needs specialised training. What this entails is not necessarily clear. Although there will historically have been many roles and functions of care within traditionally Buddhist cultures and countries, the term "Buddhist chaplaincy" is fairly new and the particular "role of 'Buddhist chaplain' seems to exist mainly in countries with significant Christian heritage where the 'template' of chaplain already exists."<sup>9</sup> And what is expected from a chaplain will depend on the context and the kind of work in question. Today, chaplaincy is in many ways "a profession open to all comers, including Buddhists, humanists, and atheists," but the expectations with regard to background and experience will vary, and "many of the educational, training, and professional standards for certification or licensing are still normed against Christian expectations and legacy organizational structures, particularly in North America, Europe, and the British Commonwealth."<sup>10</sup> Buddhist chaplaincy is thus still a "work in progress" when it comes to what makes it particularly Buddhist. And what makes an individual a Buddhist, which is one of the criteria above, will also be a question that might not have a strict answer. The Buddhist

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8. Sanford and Michon (2019: 1); this is from the introduction to the article, and is not necessarily meant to be a comprehensive definition of Buddhist chaplaincy as such.

9. Compson (2015: under heading "Buddhist Chaplaincy")

10. Sanford and Michon (2019: 1). Several institutions, particularly in the USA, are now offering courses in Buddhist chaplaincy. One such is the New York Zen Centre (<https://zencare.org/accredited-chaplaincy-training-cpe/>) whose programme is accredited by the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education (<https://acpe.edu/>).



chaplain will presumably know whether they “fit the bill”, but seeing as one of the core areas of interest in Buddhism is the difficulty with finding the “self” and defining what something truly is, a Buddhist might become quarrelsome when asked to self-identify.

Both descriptions above are, however, broad when it comes to what the main concern is. By any means necessary, the chaplain will seek to help people cope with anxiety and relieve suffering, and they do so within the settings where people need it. One need not be in a particularly religious or spiritual place or setting to receive care from a chaplain, but will meet them wherever needed, such as in hospitals, prisons, and so forth. And within these various settings the chaplain will seek to “foster people’s growth” and help develop sound and supportive communities.

Caring for people is something chaplaincy has in common with many professions, such as doctors, social workers, or psychologists. But chaplaincy has a particular approach to its care, and Lartey narrows this down by adding that the chaplain “recognizes a transcendent dimension to human life.” We find something similar also in Sanford and Michon’s description, when they specify that the chaplain will care in particular for the “spiritual needs” of the person suffering. What this transcendent dimension is is not specified in Lartey’s definition. It is this that the chaplain and the one they engage with might explore. Perhaps it is God, perhaps different gods for the chaplain and the one they engage with — perhaps something entirely different. Although this “distinguishes the *pastoral* caregiver from other carers,” Lartey is careful to emphasise that this does not mean that the pastoral carer “is superior or that his or her efforts are couched in esoteric or else overtly evangelistic terms.” Quite the contrary. The pastoral carer is “not overly anxious to be distinguished from other caregivers,” or “to draw attention to themselves” or “the mystery they recognize. [...] [R]ather they possess a deep consciousness that is as suspicious of superficial or facile interpretations as it is of pretentious ones.”<sup>11</sup>

What the chaplain essentially does is listen. To listen and be present for the one they care about. And what they must recognise when meeting someone, according to Lartey, is that the person in front of them are at the same time 1. like all others, 2. like some others, and 3. like no others.<sup>12</sup> (1) We are all the same in that we all have to face the same realities, as a

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11. Lartey (2003: 27)

12. Lartey (2003: 34-35)

Buddhist would say, of “birth, aging, sickness, and death.” (2) And as human beings we are also shaped by society. One could say we have a shared karma with the community we live within. (3) But we are also unique. So whatever preconceptions one might have when it comes to cultural or societal labels when meeting someone, they might not be correct, and will certainly not all be accurate. Lartey warns the chaplain not to overemphasise any of these three over the others. As a chaplain one should approach a new encounter with openness. Judith Simmer-Brown provides the following description for how a Buddhist chaplain might approach such a situation:

*We are left, in Buddhist terms, in open space, in a realm of emptiness in which we recognize that relative concepts cannot accurately describe the nature of our relationship with our dialogue partner. On an absolute level, we are joined by our mutual and distinct experiences of no reference point: on an (sic.) relative level, we experience in that vast space the warmth and wildness of our mutual humanity, which Buddhists call compassion.<sup>13</sup>*

## 2.2 The role(s) I bring to the role

This thesis I am writing is deeply personal to me. It is the conclusion of a long, and in recent years difficult, journey to develop a kind of professional and meaningful role for myself in Norway that, given my background, has not been so straightforward. In this sub-section I will describe and discuss the particular factors that have led me to this point, and how this influences my approach to the matter at hand. The experiences I have had while studying for this master’s degree, and particularly those I had during and in relation to the practical part of the programme when I had my first encounters with Buddhist chaplaincy, will be dealt with in the second main section.

This disclosure is relevant to the thesis in at least four ways. Firstly, I believe it is relevant and important to show who I am because my background necessarily influences how I approach the subject, what I emphasise, and which conclusions I reach. And the reason why I reach these conclusions is just as important as the conclusions themselves. For instance, I am here writing about Buddhist chaplaincy, and as we saw above one may describe or define

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13. Simmer-Brown (2000: 320)

Buddhist chaplaincy as chaplaincy that a Buddhist performs. Whether I am a Buddhist, and in what way I am a Buddhist, is therefore relevant.

Secondly, by approaching the issue in an open manner and showing who I am, I will treat the topic more personally than if I wrote about it with more distance. And since I am using my own role and experiences as the research material, the material I will be able to work with will be more “juicy”, in the sense of more direct, personal, deeper and, hopefully, engaging for the reader.

Thirdly, the approach will influence the experience of the reader. The reader will know who they are reading about, understand (hopefully) where I am coming from, be able to take part in the journey, and thereby become more engaged in the story I tell and the conclusions I draw. I am writing to make sense of this for myself, but the medium is first and foremost a means of communicating my process and research so that others may potentially take part in it as well.

Finally, although chaplaincy is first and foremost about how to care for others in ways that are not just physical or mental, but also has an element of transcendence, the means by which this is performed is communication, whether silent or verbal, or any other way it might happen. And a fundamental part of this communication is showing the individual one is meeting who they are speaking to. This does not of course mean that one has to recount one’s life’s story whenever a new relationship of care is established, or that one has to always disclose who one is or what role one has. This I believe has to be judged with every encounter. But it does mean that one should strive to approach every encounter with honesty, integrity and openness. And presenting my thesis in this manner is itself a statement about what sort of role and dialogue chaplaincy requires, whether Buddhist or otherwise.

So who is this “I” that I keep referring to? I am a 44 year old male Norwegian. That I am (as far as I know) what one could call “ethnically” Norwegian is perhaps also relevant, at least in relation to the fact that I am a follower of a religious tradition, Buddhism, that was relatively recently introduced to Norway. One could say I am a convert to a non-native religion. I had a relatively normal upbringing in a middle class family, moving around a bit because of my father’s work as a civil engineer in the oil industry, but attending most of my schooling in Asker, a town half an hour outside of the capital Oslo. I did fairly well in school, and started studying to become a civil engineer before a change of heart lead me in the

direction of history of religions and Asian languages instead. My father passed away when I was 20 years old, an experience that I believe left a lasting impact on me and shaped my life choices to quite an extent. Death and the limited time in which we have to live this life were things I spent much time thinking about. I was interested in philosophy, religion and eventually mainly in Buddhism from the age of 17-18, and at the age of 22, after having identified as a Buddhist for a few years, I moved to Kathmandu to enter a study programme that was a cooperation between Kathmandu University and the monastery Ka-Nying Shedrup Ling in Boudhanath. There I completed a four-year bachelor honours programme, focussed mainly on Mahayana Buddhist philosophy as well as the Tibetan and Sanskrit languages. During my last year of studies I was ordained as a Buddhist monk and was able to live and study with the other monks in the monastery. Shortly after finishing my four years in Boudhanath, one of my younger brothers passed away unexpectedly, something that strengthened my disillusionment with the world and left me even less inclined to follow a “normal” path in life. Still, my brother’s death also left me deeply depressed, and I had to discontinue my stay in Kathmandu due to deteriorating health. On my permanent return to Norway I was also unable to continue a life according to formal monastic requirements.

After a period back in Oslo I completed a master’s degree in history of religions with a focus on Buddhist literature, and for some years worked for a professor at the University of Oslo on various projects mainly involving ancient Buddhist manuscripts, editing and publishing Tibetan and Sanskrit texts, as well as producing translations into English. Although working for several years within academia, and researching and producing a lot of material that could potentially result in a doctoral dissertation, I was due to various reasons unable to take the next step and establish a proper career path within the field. My interest in Buddhism was perhaps more religious than academic, and I eventually left academia for a while and entered a retreat programme at another Buddhist institution in Kathmandu, where I remained for four years. The programme was for international students of a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, and loosely based on the traditional three-years-and-three-forthnights retreat that prepares mainly Tibetan monks and nuns for the role of “lama” (Tib: *bla ma*), or Buddhist guide and instructor. I returned to Norway again at the age of 39, partly for family reasons. Living in Oslo together with my brother, I renewed my involvement both with the Tibetan Buddhist centre Karma Tashi Ling, giving introductory courses in Buddhism, and

participated in some academic work through the Norwegian Institute of Philology at MF,<sup>14</sup> mainly as a teacher of the classical Tibetan language.

At this point I began pondering how best to utilise all of my combined experience in a way that would be useful in a Norwegian work environment. Having spent so many years studying, working on various projects, and in meditation retreat, I felt I had very little formal work experience and was quite unsure of whether an academic career was a viable option going forward. This was when I stumbled upon the master's programme in chaplaincy at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oslo. It seemed like the perfect solution. I had many years of academic experience, studying Buddhism as an "outsider". I had spent many years studying Buddhism as an "insider", both in a formal study environment and in a contemplative retreat environment. I had a role as a teacher ("lama") at the Buddhist centre. My interests in Buddhism are in a sense both theoretical and practical. To then be able to spend some years learning how I might combine these interests and create a role for myself where I could potentially be able to have a job helping people with the difficult experiences and questions of life by utilising my experience with Buddhism both directly and indirectly, seemed like a very good path forward.

So how should I then present myself to those I will potentially encounter? In her article "Secret Atheist" Monica Sanford writes about the challenges of expectation one might face as a Buddhist chaplain, especially when working within contexts where chaplaincy is primarily associated with Christianity. Perhaps the most pressing question in such instances is whether one should reveal one's religion or life stance. Is it beneficial to do so right away for how the encounter will develop? Does it create immediate barriers, or can it establish a common understanding from the outset that the chaplain and the one they meet can work from? Sanford suggests that "when, how, and whether or not to disclose one's religious tradition to care seekers is highly contextual, a judgement call that must be made by each individual in the moment."<sup>15</sup> As a Buddhist chaplain herself she describes how one may enter what she calls an "as-if space" when this might be most useful under particular circumstances. One may not believe in God, for example as a Buddhist, but if one is continuously working within an environment where this belief is taken more or less for granted, one may for instance take

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14. MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society in Oslo.

15. Sanford (2019: 203)

part in conversations and the day-to-day life of the institution *as-if* God exists. When explaining what makes her able to enter this *as-if space* without it being disingenuous, Sanford refers to what she calls “the particular Buddhist magic of ‘not-knowing’”, or “beginner’s mind”, the latter being a particular Zen Buddhist concept describing an ideal way to enter any situation with a completely open mind, without preconceptions.<sup>16</sup> This is first of all a useful, and perhaps at times necessary, approach or technique for “fitting in” when one is in the minority, a situation a Buddhist chaplain may find themselves in quite regularly I would expect when working within a chaplaincy environment in Europe or America, where Christianity has traditionally been the dominant religion. But it is also I believe a good way to approach chaplaincy in general. Every encounter one has will be unique, and to be open and sensitive to the expectations and needs of the person one is meeting should be paramount initially. And if the situation requires that the chaplain “goes along” with the beliefs and vocabulary of the one seeking care, not because one necessarily shares them or agrees with them but because one respects them and leaves the space open for their possibility, then the *as-if* approach may certainly be followed.

I thus believe there is no right or wrong answer with regard to the question of how and to what extent one should make one’s own background and views part of the encounter. When meeting someone in the capacity of chaplain it is of course the one seeking solace that should be the focus. And one may, when the occasion demands it, try to take up as little space as possible and allow the care seeker to choose which direction the meeting takes. A Buddhist chaplain may even try to approach the situation with the complete openness of the *beginner’s mind*. Still, it is a dialogue, and one will always be 50% of that dialogue, strictly speaking. The chaplain will therefore do well in being conscious of what their own role(s) may be, on many different levels, even though it/these may not be explicitly stated. How the care seeker perceives one, and how one perceives oneself, will certainly influence how the meeting develops. And the investigation into who one is, is probably something that is best done in one’s own time, although new encounters may inspire one to come to a better understanding of one’s own role.

The concept that I have made the centrepiece of my thesis is the *threefold purity*, the details of which will be further explained in the next section. But in short, one could say that

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16. Sanford (2019: 208)

this thesis is about a search for a *role-free role*. Having come to the field of practical chaplaincy with a background in Buddhism, and with a keen interest in Buddhist philosophy, I was quite naturally drawn towards the topic of role and identity. And this is, I believe, perhaps one of the unique insights that Buddhism can contribute to the field. The way I have come to understand it, Buddhism is in a sense about figuring ourselves out so that we may eventually be able to let go of ourselves. What this means, and what one is actually talking about when referring to the “self”, is not however so straightforward, and this is basically the reason why Buddhism has an incredibly complex philosophical tradition. To simplify things, we can say that the self is in fact merely a misunderstanding. Based on our past habits we take something that is in fact a very complex set of factors and impose the idea of a unity on these factors, calling it “the self”. This again creates the foundation for further bad habits that fuel our samsaric way of perceiving the world and our fellow beings. We become self-obsessed and prejudiced individuals that are unable to truly be there for each other. The remedy that Buddhism offers is basically a way to deconstruct this mistaken idea. A path to selflessness. A path to a role-free role. And one of my main roles is that I am a traveller on this path.

Or am I? Buddhism can be confounding. Mind-bending. And I believe that one role that I have to keep in check when entering into the role of a chaplain, is that of the over-excited Buddhist philosopher. Too many philosophical paradoxes is probably not what someone who is for instance grieving the death of a loved one needs. Perhaps they much prefer a priest-like figure such as a *lama*, a Tibetan version of a Buddhist teacher. I am referred to as a “lama” in certain contexts when functioning within the Buddhist centre in Oslo, and it always makes me uncomfortable. Perhaps it is partly because it is a translation of the Sanskrit term *guru*, a title that for many may lead one to think about charismatic religious leaders. For some, their thoughts probably quickly strays in the direction of “charlatan”. I tell myself that if it is beneficial that I am a “lama” in certain contexts, so be it. At other times I much prefer being an “academic”. Often I prefer being “Norwegian”. Sharing an identity with someone may be a way of finding common ground. And when meeting followers of other religions, being “religious” might be such an identity.

In short, I have several roles, several identities, that manifest within different contexts and with different people. From a Buddhist perspective one could say that none of them are

exclusively “me”. But they all contribute to the experience I now bring into the role as a Buddhist chaplain. If used well, they may be resources I can use to help people. And none of them should be discounted. Even the things I am not so proud of may become useful when meeting people who are presumably just as flawed as myself. And although I do not carry the robes of a Buddhist monk anymore, and do not feel that I am ever quite ready to contribute, I try not to let the feeling of inadequacy overwhelm me.

Sanford talks about the “imposter syndrome” when describing what it feels like for her to be a Buddhist chaplain within a theocentric environment: a “religious atheist”, which to many probably sounds absurd. She describes it as “a feeling of self-doubt or fraud that discounts one’s achievements or the status one has earned, and the anxiety associated with feeling that others may discover one to be ‘undeserving’ or not competent in their role.”<sup>17</sup> I have not had the same experiences of working within a theistic setting as she has, but I believe I also suffer from the imposter syndrome to some extent. Am I really Buddhist “enough” to be a Buddhist chaplain? Perhaps this self-doubt can become a resource.

### 2.3 The threefold purity (*trimandalaparīśuddha*): a Buddhist ideal

*He will not be conceited, thinking of himself as moral,  
and he will not guard his morality with a selfish attitude.  
Someone who practices the bodhisattva path maintains his morality  
by guarding his morality without having any conception of morality.*<sup>18</sup>

This verse describing how a *bodhisattva*, the ideal Mahayana Buddhist practitioner, should relate to his or her practice of morality or discipline (*śīla*), is taken from the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka*, “The Collected Teachings on the Bodhisattva,” one of several canonical texts describing how the philosophical insights of the Prajñāpāramitā’s emptiness doctrine may be applied in practice as the bodhisattva progresses through the stages of the path

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17. Sanford (2019: 212)

18. *na śīlavantebhi manena manyate na ātmasaṃjñāya sa śīlu rakṣati | śīlaṃ ca rakṣī na ca śīlasaṃjñī sa śīlavanto cari bodhicaryām*; Liland et al. (Forthcoming), *Bodhisattvapiṭaka: A Diplomatic Edition*, MS61b (my translation).



towards Buddhahood.<sup>19</sup> As in many other Mahayana texts, the path of the bodhisattva is described as mainly centred around six (or sometimes ten) *pāramitās*, “perfections” or “transcendences”, that may be described as virtues which are taken to their utmost perfection. As one etymological explanation of the word *pāramitā* favoured by the Tibetan interpretation has it, and which also provides us with a poignant image of the journey one has to take across the ocean of samsara to reach awakening, one literally *travels (itā, phyin pa) to the other shore (pāram, pha rol tu)* through the practice of these virtues. The six virtues in question are generosity (*dāna*), discipline (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), perseverance (*vīrya*), concentration (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*), one building upon the other and preparing the aspiring candidate, the bodhisattva, for insights and activities that are increasingly closer to those of a perfectly awakened buddha. At one point though, a leap from the ordinary to the extraordinary has to be made, for the insights and activities of a buddha are truly unlike those of ordinary beings in one essentially important way: they are beyond the personal, the selfish, or the identity-based ways that beings still trapped in samsara usually engage with everything. The ego or self (*ātman*) is what ultimately stands in the way for Buddhist virtues to approach their ideals, and the task of the bodhisattvas as they train through the steps of the path is therefore to approach these virtues in an increasingly and ultimately completely egoless or selfless (*anātman*) way. As the verse above states, the bodhisattva should ideally guard his “morality without having any conception of morality”. Because, as is mentioned a few verses down,

*The morality of someone who does not consider himself  
to be a moral person is undeteriorated, untarnished.  
Where there is no self there is no conception of morality.  
This is the profound wisdom of the path of awakening.<sup>20</sup>*

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19. The Prañāpāramitā Sūtras is a collection of fundamental Mahayana texts (perhaps even the earliest) describing mainly the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and forming the backbone of Mahayana philosophy. The most common translation of the Sanskrit *prajñāpāramita* is “perfection of wisdom”.

20. *akhaṇḍaśīlaṃ ca amṛṣṭaśīlaṃ na ātma utthāpayi śīlavo smmi | yatro na ātmā na ca śīlasamjñā gambhīraprajñā cari bodhicaryām*; Liland et al. (Forthcoming: MS61b). My translation.

How is it possible to do something without having the conception, the attitude, that one is doing it? This is where the concept of *trimaṇḍalapariśuddha*, the “threefold purity”, or purity (*pariśuddha*) of the three spheres (*trimaṇḍala*), becomes relevant. The three spheres in question are in general the subject, the object and the matter in question.<sup>21</sup> Speaking in particular about the virtue of generosity, Apple describes perfected acts free of concepts (*nirvikalpapāramitā*) as “being triply pure (*trimaṇḍalapariśuddha*) in making no distinction between the thing given (*deya*), the donor (*dāyaka*) and the recipient (*pratigrāhaka*)”.<sup>22</sup> And this applies to *mutatis mutandis* to all the other virtues as well, as we find it described in the Prajñāpāramitā-literature itself:

*The supramundane perfection of giving consists in the threefold complete purity. What is the threefold complete purity? In that case a bodhisattva-mahāsattva giving a gift does not apprehend a self, does not apprehend a recipient, and does not apprehend a gift; also he does not apprehend its [i.e., giving’s] result. [...] He surrenders that gift to all beings, but does not apprehend those beings, or himself either. And, although he dedicates that gift to the supreme awakening, he*

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21. Although this is the most common way that the triple purity is presented in Buddhist literature, early sources also mention that the “three spheres” in question may refer to the past, the present and the future, as well as to emptiness and the unconditioned nature of all things in general. Cf. Liland et al. (Forthcoming), MS45a: “Śāriputra, awakening is not of the past. It is not of the future. It is not of the present. It is the same with regard to the three times, and it has cut through the three spheres. In what way has it cut through the three spheres? It does not engage with thoughts of the past, it does not pursue ideas of the future, and it is not occupied with thoughts in the present. With great compassion for sentient beings, the Tathāgata sees that they do not recognize this sameness of the three times, the purification of the three spheres, which is not limited by mind, thoughts, or consciousness, and does not conceptualize the past, think about the future, or elaborate on the present, and so he pledges to help them realize it. Śāriputra, awakening is an unembodied and unconditioned complete realization. It is not perceived by the eye consciousness, and is likewise not perceived by the others, up to and including the mind consciousness. It is said to be unconditioned as it is not something that appears, disintegrates, or remains. In this way one can say that it is free from the three spheres and unconditioned. One should understand the conditioned in the same way as one understands the unconditioned. How should one thus understand the conditioned? There are no phenomena that have a real essential nature. As there are no real entities there, there is no duality. With great compassion for sentient beings, the Tathāgata sees that they do not recognize the unembodied and unconditioned, and so he pledges to help them realize it.” My translation.

22. Apple (2016: 13)

*does not apprehend any awakening. This is called the supra-mundane perfection of giving, and it is called “supra-mundane” because one swerves away from the world, departs from it, passes beyond it. In the same way should the difference between the worldly and the supra-mundane perfections of morality, patience, diligence, and concentration be understood.*<sup>23</sup>

We see here that a perfected act, or ideal way of approaching an activity according to Mahayana Buddhism, is one in which the actor manages to transcend the roles we normally associate with interactions in the world. As common sense as well as the grammar of most languages would usually dictate, an act that is carried out requires a subject, and in the case of deeds that are considered beneficial or harmful to others, an object. There are thus in general three “spheres” that operate relative to each other when we do something in relation to others. We act within the framework of the assumption that (1) we are individuals (2) that perform acts (3) in relation to other individuals. In Buddhism, however, it is the confusion (*moha*) of clinging to the idea of a self (*ātman*) that is the fundamental root cause of all suffering. This is what perpetuates the samsaric state, what is at the root of the problems we experience ourselves and in our relationships with others, and what keeps us from realising our true potential, the state of a perfectly awakened buddha. It is therefore ideally through ridding ourselves of the conceptions of normal subject-object relationships, or as the Mahayana Buddhist terminology phrases it, by “purifying the three spheres,” that our virtues may reach their perfection and become acts that propel one towards buddhahood. The bodhisattva will therefore always strive in every activity to be as perfectly selfless as possible, to consider others not as alien recipients of his or her acts, and that the object or act in question has no inherent reality (*svabhāva*).

This is however not merely a mental exercise that the bodhisattva trainee employs in order to counteract something that is otherwise the case, but reflects a deeper understanding of the actual reality of things. Just as the absence of self (*anātman*) is a fundamental truth shared by all Buddhist schools, the philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) which extends the doctrine of selflessness to all phenomena lies at the heart of the Mahayana understanding of

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23. Apple (2016: 13)

reality. Through application of this doctrine the bodhisattva can come to the understanding that all things lack an inherent reality, and that it is merely our concepts of things as real that keep us attached to them and perpetuates our unhealthy relationship with ourselves and our surroundings. So although the bodhisattva must still travel along the path of awakening (*bodhicaryā*) and practice the virtues that act as fuel for reaching the progressively higher stages that ultimately result in buddhahood, he or she must do so without believing that this practice is in any way inherently real, lest the virtues engaged in become tainted. To repeat the words from the *Bodhisattvapiṭaka* that introduced this section, the bodhisattva should “maintain[s] his morality by guarding his morality without having any conception of morality.”<sup>24</sup> I would suggest that the balance that seems to be desired here is that between a genuine involvement that considers the subject matter of utmost importance combined with a certain sense of intellectual distance that sees the bigger picture and avoids becoming selfishly and emotionally involved. We will discuss further below, in the context of how the threefold purity may serve as a model for Buddhist dialogue and chaplaincy, how this may be done in practice, and what may be the challenges of employing such a supramundane ideal when trying to relate to dialogue partners without oneself being an advanced bodhisattva.

One final aspect that should be mentioned is the fact that the threefold purity as it is used explicitly in the present context is not necessarily a universal Buddhist concept, and so we should be somewhat cautious in claiming that it may serve as a model for any type of Buddhist dialogue. The Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) seems to originally have been a movement within Buddhism that to some extent criticised the limited and rigid approach of what it pejoratively named the *hīnayāna* (“Lesser Vehicle”). As Braarvig mentions when discussing this principle, the threefold purity “is clearly polemical against earlier tradition, where purifying the gift to get the maximum fruit (*phala*) was important.”<sup>25</sup> So although one may argue that it is based in universal Buddhist concepts, this particular use of the concept as a polemical tool when making the point that a true bodhisattva should not be concerned with maximising meritorious profits, may illustrate that we should advance with some caution when suggesting that it could have universal appeal within Buddhist circles.

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24. See above quote for reference.

25. Braarvig (1994: 121)

## 2.4 A model for Buddhist chaplaincy and dialogue

*Finally, as you begin to focus on process over outcomes, you will discover that the greatest gift you have to offer as a caregiver is to be a vessel through whom the Holy Spirit can operate. You will be a source for healing to the extent that you are able to set aside your own agenda.*<sup>26</sup>

As I set out to suggest how the approach of the threefold purity may be a foundation for a theory of the *ideal Buddhist encounter*, I here give a quote by Sara Butler from her book *Caring Ministry: A Contemplative Approach to Pastoral Care* because I believe that we in a sense are touching upon similar ideas. Buddhism is very much a contemplative tradition where silence and meditation are emphasised as paths that will lead to greater insight and freedom. And although we (usually) make no reference to an almighty God or a Holy Spirit in our prayers, there is certainly a sense of a transcendent truth beyond this mundane world of confusion that inspires us. I bracket “usually” because there is no lack of divine figures in Mahayana Buddhism, and especially within Tibetan Buddhism with which I am most familiar. Although revered as buddhas, many of these figures are in fact bodhisattvas (candidate buddhas) who embody the various Mahayana ideals that are necessary to practice in order to attain awakening. And they all represent the motivation of *bodhicitta*, “the mind of awakening”, which is the inspiration and driving force that propels a bodhisattva towards their goal. If one were to search for a concept that could be the equivalent for *Holy Spirit* within Buddhism, *bodhicitta* would be a very good candidate. It is at the same time a conviction that one is now on the path to complete and perfect awakening (*samyaksambuddha*) and an unselfish and compassionate motivation that will prioritise all other sentient beings before oneself both in mundane matters and with regard to that goal. It is inspiration. And it is what makes the bodhisattva able to, as Butler suggests, “set aside your own agenda” when attempting to provide compassionate care to other individuals.

As we have seen, it is the approach of the threefold purity which describes how a bodhisattva is able to do this: to transcend the normal subject-object relationship and engage in acts that are truly selfless. And as the attentive reader will have ascertained, it is the

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26. Butler (2004: 26)

framework of the threefold purity that I am suggesting may enable the Buddhist chaplain to do the same. It is a topic of much discussion in Buddhism how the combination of the apparent contradiction of detachment and closeness, of (seeming) coolness and care, of emptiness and compassion, can be the key that unlocks the true potential of both. The technical terms used in the Mahayana for these two are *prajñā* (“wisdom”) and *upāya* (“method”) respectively, and they are often described as the two wings of a bird. Without one, the other cannot truly function. Without *upāya*, *prajñā* will be frigid and useless, an insight that has to practical application or relevance. And without *prajñā*, *upāya* will in most cases amount to useless help, stupid compassion, acts that may be well-intentioned but will often lead to unwanted consequences. This is why intention is considered preeminent in the Mahayana. Intention precedes all physical, verbal and mental acts. Without it, an act is in fact not truly an act (*karma*) at all, in the sense that it does not have the true consequences of a karmic act. From the Mahayana Buddhist perspective therefore, a relationship of genuine selfless care cannot take place without giving up our conventional concepts of subject, object and act. We have to purify (*pariśuddha*) the three spheres (*trimaṇḍala*).

Sanford describes how this may manifest in practice. In her research into how Buddhist chaplains experienced their encounters, she reports that, “[a]s their spiritual care practice advanced, so too did their ability to listen selflessly to careseekers. Chaplains reported experiences in which their own sense of self faded into the background—though not gone, it was not the focus of the current situation. They manifested ‘nondual listening’ (i.e., without separate subject and object) based in what they perceived as direct experiences of non-self (*anatta* in Pāli). In other words, chaplains reported that because there is no inherent separation between self and other, they were able to be fully present in that moment and listen to the other as self and also as neither self nor other. Furthermore, they justified this phenomenon not merely as a psychological experience but as a direct experience of reality as ‘empty’ (*śūnyatā*) of inherent existence, per the Buddhadharmā.”<sup>27</sup> Leaving aside the possibility that the informants Sanford are here referring to may have been well-versed in Buddhist jargon, and that how they have chosen to express themselves may thus be heavily influenced by their expectations of what a “Buddhist experience” of reality should be, what they seem to be describing here seems to be heading towards the ideal of the threefold purity.

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27. Sanford and Michon (2019: 8-9)

It was their ability to let the separation between self and other dissolve that enabled them to be present for the other individual and truly listen. When describing what led up to the development of this ability, Sanford reports that the participants “cultivated their ability to listen through all manner of suffering and to remain present, grounded, and emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy without getting ‘hooked’ or caught up in the careseeker’s distress or their own analysis.”<sup>28</sup>

Judith Simmer-Brown touches on a similar experience when discussing inter-religious communication and the Buddhist understanding of pluralism. In Buddhism, she explains, “pluralism is an expression of discovery of *sūnyatā*, the recognition that there is no way to grasp conceptually what the relationship is with the dialogue partner. Out of this positionless position, tremendous warmth and interest arises naturally. In environments such as these, attempts to appropriate, categorize, or subjugate the partner have been given up and genuine interest in communication has dawned. When we have this kind of interest, we appreciate that the truth of the other person is his or her own, and we might learn from the partner's truth. Engaging in dialogue with this view could radically transform interreligious communication, its conduct and its tenor.”<sup>29</sup> Again, we see how the two wings of the bird mentioned above function in union, and that one thing will naturally lead to the other. A genuine meeting of two people will only happen when one moves beyond conventional concepts and realises emptiness, *sūnyatā*. And in the “positionless position”, the role-less role, of the threefold purity, one will truly be able to connect with the other individual, which is no longer “other”. A high bar to meet, and a difficult process to grasp. Which is as one would expect when Buddhism itself describes this state as “beyond language and concepts and so impossible to describe using language and concepts.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps a more easily accessible approach may be found in Mikel Monnett’s article where he explains how the Three Tenet approach of the Zen Buddhist Peacemaker Order may be a practical model for how to approach Buddhist pastoral care. The three tenets are *not knowing*, *bearing witness* and *healing action*, not to be confused with the three spheres. Concerning the first point, Monnett explains how one may, in his his experience, enter a

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28. Sanford and Michon (2019: 8)

29. Simmer-Brown (2000: 327)

30. Sanford (2019: 9)

situation of care with the approach of *not knowing* by walking “into a situation without a preset agenda. This means that you walk into the patient's room with what we call ‘empty mind’; this does not mean that you walk into the room with a blank mind. Rather, when you walk into the patient's room, you bring with you everything that you have learned, everything that you have experienced, and everything that you are. But you do not plan on what you're going to do until you take a look at the situation as it presents itself.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, when engaging with the care seeker one strives towards having no preconceived notions. Buddhism could perhaps phrase it in the following way: On a relative level one comes to the meeting with all one's background and baggage. This should be acknowledged, and is also why one Buddhist term for our everyday experience of the world is the relative *truth*. It may be relative, conventional, even fictional (*saṃvṛtti*, *kun rdzob*), but it is still *true* (*satya*, *bden pa*). It is the reality that we have to work with. However, in order to see the person we are meeting as clearly as possible, without the bias that our ideas may bring to the situation, we try to empty ourselves, to leave ourselves, our self (*ātman*), at the door and attempt to see the situation more from the point of view of the ultimate (*paramārtha*) truth.

To go beyond our normal way of experiencing a meeting, to remain in the threefold purity and just be there for someone, will normally take a lot of practice. But as we have seen from the descriptions above it is an ideal that Buddhist chaplains have had experiences of, whether actually real or perhaps just ideals that they are aiming towards in their encounters. Whatever the case, from the Buddhist point of view it is definitely a possibility, and one that may potentially bring great rewards not just for Buddhist chaplains but for chaplaincy in general, and perhaps for the art of human encounters in general, as we will discuss further below.

### 2.5 What the Buddhist ideal may contribute to the field of chaplaincy

Buddhist chaplaincy cannot of course be reduced to the technicalities of the encounter between two individuals, and there may be many tools and approaches that Buddhism can potentially contribute to the field of chaplaincy in general. I have however chosen to focus here on one fundamental aspect of Buddhist philosophy, the threefold purity, that I believe sets the tone for many of the other contributions it has to offer. And if we are to follow the

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31. Monnett (2005: 59-60)



spirit of Buddhism as I have come to know it, this contribution should be offered to the field without any demands of allegiance. One need not be a Buddhist to benefit from this approach. Perhaps the approach itself, seeing that it encourages us to let go of the roles and preconceptions that we constantly drag around, is an encouragement not to be a Buddhist at all in the circumstances where it is relevant. The best way *to be there* for someone, from a Buddhist perspective, is perhaps in a sense *not to be anything at all*.

As confounding as this might be, there are very practical and important benefits to this approach that have been suggested in literature on Buddhist chaplaincy in the past. For instance, as a chaplain, and in other professions as well, one will encounter a great deal of pain and suffering that may not be easy to deal with even though one may put up a brave face when meeting someone in great need. Butler, writing from a Christian context, describes what may happen when the carer “attempts to take on the responsibility of the care receiver or of God.” The chaplain may experience anger if the one cared for does not respond as expected. They may become impatient, wanting immediate results. They may end up exhausted, trying too hard to make the care seeker feel well. And all of this may lead to withdrawal, as when there is nothing more medical science can do for an individual and doctors and nurses stop attending to someone because there is nothing more they can “do”. As Butler explains, the role of a chaplain is a different one, as they “acknowledge [their] helplessness to fix what is broken and therefore are left free to provide a loving, caring presence even in an outwardly hopeless situation. Caring ministers who remain clear about their job descriptions will not withdraw from an individual in pain. Our very presence is an affirmation and belief that the divine mystery continues to operate in and through human weakness.”<sup>32</sup>

In such cases where the suffering becomes overwhelming, Buddhism may be uniquely positioned with regard to providing insights into how suffering may be dealt with. As Compson notes, “[m]any descriptions of Buddhist chaplaincy emphasize the importance of bearing witness to suffering and meeting it with compassionate presence.”<sup>33</sup> Seeing as the Four Noble Truths which are one of the foundational tenets of Buddhism starts with the blunt statement, “suffering is a fact,” one could say that suffering and how one should deal with it

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32. Butler (2004: 25)

33. Compson (2015: “The Role of Buddhist Chaplains”)

is one of the main specialities of Buddhism. Referring to the writings of Jenifer Block, director of the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco, Sanford suggests that it is the “theoretical underpinning” of Buddhism “based in non-self, non-clinging, interconnection, and accepting change that enables Buddhist chaplains to perform the basic functions of the profession, including listening, facing suffering, and ‘encouraging others to discover their own wisdom.’”<sup>34</sup>

To see how one may in practice go about applying a Buddhist approach to someone who is suffering, we may turn again to the Three Tenets referred to by Monnett some paragraphs above. He describes the second tenet of *bearing witness* as the ability “to see clearly the situation that is there no matter how painful.” When faced with unbearable suffering it might be a more natural and immediate reaction to establish some distance. A medical professional, for instance, may in such difficult situations attempt to “build a wall between themselves and their patients” lest “their own already overburdened hearts [...] break and they [will] no longer be able to do the work that they need to do.” This he suggests is an “incredibly bad idea” that leads to “much of the burnout, suicide, and substance abuse that we see among healthcare providers.” One should not run from the pain, he suggests, but let it touch one’s heart — indeed, allow one’s heart to break. “By acknowledging the pain rather than running from it, one [will find] that what he or she feared was unbearable can indeed be borne. More importantly, there is a joy that comes from being fully a part of the process of illness and healing with a patient and their family, rather than being one step removed from it.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, by letting oneself go, removing the subject-object relationship that we hold so dear, and allowing oneself to be completely present for one’s fellow being, there will be healing for both parties.

Sanford reports similar experiences when describing how her Buddhist chaplain informants employed “nondual listening” as we saw in the previous section. She describes how chaplains experienced a state in which the subject-object dichotomy is in some sense erased and one comes face-to-face with a reality beyond these normal concepts — as Buddhism would say, a direct experience of emptiness. She compares these to “the modern psychological phenomenon of ‘flow’ [...], the literary and philosophical ideas of

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34. Sanford and Michon (2019: 4)

35. Monnett (2005: 60)

deconstructivism, and the spiritual experience of ‘transcendence,’ suggesting that this “served the needs of the careseeker and also protected the chaplain from harm due to vicarious trauma and burnout.”<sup>36</sup> The pain that one fears the most, it seems may become the best armour one could wish for as a chaplain against work-related stress and exhaustion. It is indeed a well-known image from the Mahayana sutras that the bodhisattva puts on an armour (*varman, gocha*), often one of patience or compassion for sentient beings, but also one that seems to be made in a sense by the idea of transcendence, as the following statement suggests:

*[The bodhisattva] does not say, “We cannot wander in samsara for that long,” but instead, Śāriputra, he dons the armor of inconceivability and thinks to himself, “We will roam here until the very end of samsara. We will not let our vigor falter, in order to attain awakening.”*<sup>37</sup>

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36. Sanford and Michon (2019: 9)

37. Liland et al. (Forthcoming: MS 93a2): *etāvan na sansariṣyāmaḥ api tu punaḥ śāriputrācintyasannāhasannaddhena bhavitavyam\* yāvad aparāntakoṭiḥ sansārasya tāvad vayaṃ samsariṣyamaḥ parikalpam upādāya vīryaṃ na sraṃsayiṣyāmaḥ bodhāv.* My translation.

## 3. Buddhist chaplaincy in practice: my experiences with Buddhist dialogue

### 3.1 A description of the practice period

#### *The introducer*

In this third and final main section of my thesis I am setting out to give a description of my own personal experiences with Buddhist dialogue through my participation in the LES-programme at the University of Oslo. The question I started out with was, “how may the theoretical framework of *trimaṇḍalapariśuddha* inform and strengthen the case for a particular Buddhist chaplaincy, and in turn contribute to the field of chaplaincy and dialogue in general?” The theoretical framework of the threefold purity has now been established in the previous sections, a framework which this thesis is suggesting might be one that can explain what it is that makes Buddhist chaplaincy fundamentally Buddhist, and I will now share some of my experiences with attempts to apply this in practice. As the section on methodology (section 1.3) alluded to, I will let my writing here be inspired by the academic genre of autoethnography, a challenging and deeply personal style of writing. Tapping into the researcher’s own experiences and feelings as they are venturing along in their research, it is a style that should probably be employed when the experiences in question are fairly fresh. This has not been possible in my own case.

#### *The excuser*

As I write this it is Spring. I am sitting in a cabin by the Oslo Fjord that I have kindly been lent by a family member for the express purpose of finishing my master’s thesis. It is going quite well, and I am very happy to finally being able to put into words all the thoughts about the topic of Buddhist dialogue and chaplaincy that I feel have been occupying a considerable section of my brain for several years now. It is soon coming up on four years since I entered the LES master’s programme. I am telling you this because I have to now rely quite a bit on my memory for what follows. I wish to include in this thesis what it was like for me personally to venture for the first time into the role(s) of a chaplain, a dialogue partner, a

Norwegian Buddhist teacher – the roles seem difficult to tell apart, and will as I have experienced also change depending on who one is meeting. I am relying on my notes from the second semester of the programme, on my memory, but first of all on the experiences and opinions about what Buddhist chaplaincy is that I am now carrying with me three years further down the road from when my group had its practical research period. The reasons it has taken this long to finally conclude what I thought would have been completed two years ago (which is when I first planned to submit my thesis) have been partly out of my hands, depending on what I as a human, subject to various obstacles, am prepared to take responsibility for. I am perhaps, in the spirit of chaplaincy, trying to be as patient and understanding with myself as I would be with those who would come to see me.

For one, I have not been well. I have struggled with debilitating migraines and periodic exhaustion symptoms since I was a teenager, and these symptoms changed and worsened significantly during my studies. I have been through many tests throughout the years, but have never been able to get a clear answer to what is wrong with me, or whether this is just one example of the challenges one might face and ultimately has to accept as being part of the human condition. The major challenges began during the practical period of the third semester, which coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and only got worse throughout that year. Although I was able to complete my course-work at the time, the problems I had with concentration and getting through the days made it impossible for me to muster the discipline needed to go through with the writing of the actual thesis. When I did get better a year or so later, it proved to be very difficult to pick up again from where I had left off.

Although I believe I have been given every opportunity and in many ways lived a very privileged life, there has as in most people's lives been some significant challenges. The two that stands out the most for me are the early deaths of my father and brother,<sup>38</sup> and the challenges I have had with my health. These two things have most certainly affected the choices I have made in my life, perhaps even defined the route I have taken. I was already quite interested and invested in philosophy, religion, and especially Buddhism, when the deaths occurred, but seeing how fragile everything is, especially when my brother died, left me without much interest in the things that often define human existence: reaching for goals,

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38. My father died 49 years old, when I was 20. My brother died 23 years old, when I was 26.

establishing a career, and creating a family. My only goal for many years was spending my time learning about and contemplating the human condition, and keeping life and my needs as simple as possible so that I would have time to do this. Naturally, I was a Buddhist monk for a period (twice...), and although I did spend quite a lot of time in academic milieus both in Kathmandu and in Oslo, doing work that could have resulted in career opportunities, I was unable (or unwilling...) to go all the way.

### *The hesitant one*

I am neither-nor. I am too academic and irreligious to be a Buddhist, and I am too interested in philosophical and (perhaps) spiritual matters to be an academic. At least that is what I often tell myself. This, I believe, is actually how I ended up in a non-denominational study programme for chaplaincy. It has been difficult to decide where I belong, but since having entered the LES-programme being a Buddhist (or non-aligned) chaplain has seemed like a very good fit for me. I like helping people, I like talking about matters related to what our purpose is on this earth, (I don't have an answer to the previous point,) and I need a job where my strengths are appreciated and that can be combined with an, at times, challenging health condition. But I also have to have a good reason for doing something, and this is why it is ideal for me to write a thesis on Buddhist chaplaincy that combines philosophical-theoretical arguments for its usefulness with descriptions of its practical applications. The chaplaincy programme has given me new legs to stand on, in a space in-between those I usually occupy. It has helped me to make it a resource that I am hesitant about making a choice between my academic and religious motivations. And it has been an opportunity for me to try out my abilities as a Buddhist chaplain, although not in the way that I was expecting.

### *The preparer*

We were ready to go, and then the pandemic struck. The plan for the majority of our group for the third semester (Spring 2020) was that we would have our practical part of the education at Ullersmo Prison, one of the main prisons of Norway. We had had preparatory meetings with the prison chaplain who would be our mentor during our stay there, and had

been instructed in all the security arrangements that were needed to be able to work in the prison. I had even purchased a monthly travel card for the daily hour-long trip I was planning to take from Oslo to the prison, a bit further north. We would start the following Monday, and on Friday Norway closed down due to Covid-19.

Nothing was normal anymore. Rules and guidance were put in place that would have been unthinkable in a liberal democracy like Norway before this point. It became clear quite quickly that the stay at Ullersmo would be impossible, due mainly to fears of contagion, and other arrangements had to be made by the university. Professor Anne Hege Grung, who was in charge of the programme at the time and was guiding us through the preparatory steps for our stay at the prison, reacted quickly, and it was decided that we would make the current and difficult situation the focus of our practical studies. It became in a way a training in preparing for the unexpected; training in accepting the situation, however unsatisfactory, and making the best of it. Skills that would be useful for anyone, but perhaps especially for a chaplain whose job it is to be open to anything, accepting any situation (with some limitations of course), and not be too worried about what the outcome will be. The class would start by keeping a journal, having regular meetings online every Monday and Friday, and just see how things developed. The only specific instruction was to observe how we ourselves and those we were in contact with was reacting to the situation.

As time went by, each of the participants developed their own project, mostly related to the people or the organisation that they were already connected with and that was the reason for their interest in the LES-programme in the first place. I myself found that this was as good an opportunity as any to become practically aquatinted with Buddhist chaplaincy, and I got into contact with the board of the local Tibetan Buddhist organisation Karma Tashi Ling (KTL) to see whether they would be interested in hosting my first venture into Buddhist chaplaincy.

I have been associated with Karma Tashi Ling Buddhist Society for well over twenty years now, since I decided to become a Buddhist at 19-20 years of age. Throughout this time I have had various roles in the organisation, and am fairly familiar with them, as they are with me. I have acted in the role of teacher and councillor in Buddhist practice there during many courses and retreats, ever since I finished my first four-year stay with studies in a Buddhist monastery in Kathmandu. A major process of introduction and background checking was

therefore not necessary. I wrote a formal letter of request to the board, telling them about the study programme I was taking part in, and suggesting that it could be a good thing for the organisation to provide a space for members who needed to contact someone for private consultations about matters related to Buddhism or perhaps more general existential questions, especially now that we were experiencing a national and world-wide crisis. A copy of the letter is provided here in appendix 1.<sup>39</sup>

The board of KTL responded positively to this, but one member with a background in the health services had questions about confidentiality and how I was planning to use these conversations in my research project. I explained that, “[...] apart from my wish to provide this in the current situation, this offer of [chaplaincy] consultations will be a replacement for the practical experience I was supposed to have in a prison at this time. But it is not a research project as such. It is a practical part [of an education] much in the same way as a medical nurse will practice [in a hospital] as part of his or her education. I will not be using the conversations directly in my research. The idea is primarily to gain an experience with chaplaincy. But I will be documenting what we have been through, without going into detail, and then draw general experiences from the practice period when I write a report this Spring. The study programme has the same requirements for its students as that for a health worker programme, and we are being familiarised with research ethics and questions around confidentiality.”<sup>40</sup> Satisfied with my answer, the board gave me the go-ahead, and a text was authored explaining that I, as well as a Buddhist nun with a background as a psychologist, would be offering members (and others who were interested) the opportunity to book appointments and talk to us via an internet dialogue platform.<sup>41</sup>

The whole process of planning took only about three weeks, and in the beginning of April I was ready to receive my first online chaplaincy clients.

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39. The letter is, naturally, written in Norwegian.

40. My translation of original text. See appendix 3 for Norwegian version.

41. A copy of the text that was published on the KTL website is provided in appendix 2.



## 3.2 Encounters

### *The imposter*

*[B]eing an official religious representative does not automatically confer pastoral ability. As a matter of fact, there are many who testify that those who have been of greatest pastoral relevance for them have not been the most obvious or recognized. It is crucial that we study the pastoring function and not simply the official pastoring functionaries. Pastoral care may be mediated through the least recognized source. Unless this reality is recognized and incorporated into the study of it, much that is of the essence of pastoral care will be lost.<sup>42</sup>*

Even though I had prepared fairly well and had experience as a Buddhist teacher from before, it felt a bit intimidating to invite strangers to a conversation about existential issues, as if I had anything to offer them. The imposter syndrome is one that I am quite familiar with. I was determined to go into the meetings I would have over the following weeks and months without too many expectations about what we would talk about, and how they would develop. I wanted to be open, interested, non-judgmental, and even though I had not worked through the whole framework of the threefold purity that I presented in the first sections of this thesis, I would try as far as possible to let my guard down so that our meetings were as free and natural as possible. Maybe we could even share moments of transcendence.

These attempts to let go of my expectations were potentially just that: expectations. I came to experience that my ideals when entering into a conversation had the potential for getting in the way of themselves. It is a bit like trying to breath calmly when one is having a panic attack. If you try too hard you will not be able to calm down. Or the experience one might have when trying to learn how to meditate. In Buddhism it is said that to learn how to meditate is to learn how to unlearn. The harder you try, the worse it gets. One needs to “do something” in the beginning, but when you get going the best thing is to try to relax into it. Like riding a bicycle.

As Lartey hints at in the statement above, one can never know what will be of most

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42. Lartey (2003: 27)

benefit to the care seeker one is meeting. To plan too much or try to force a particular “cure” on the other person is probably not a good idea. And the help that the chaplain may provide is also not something that comes automatically with the position itself. The background of the chaplain, and their particular life stance will of course play some role in a meeting. But the general impression I myself have from reading advice from active chaplains, whatever their background, is that the best thing one can do is to try to create the space for healing to happen. Just as one is advised to approach meditation, a chaplain might as we have seen previously do well with an approach of *not knowing* and simply ease into the encounter. And as in meditation, let silence, the space between the words, be the catalyst and not the enemy of the conversation. It is a very familiar idea in Buddhism that silence may be the best pathway to new insights. This might take training though, and in the conversations I had it was quite difficult to rid myself of the feeling that I had to provide something “useful” for the one I was talking to. I was after all the one who had invited them to these conversations.

### *The Buddhist*

A role I could not escape when entering into these conversations was of course that of a Buddhist. I was in a way looking forward to working in the prison where I would not be immediately identified with Buddhism and all the associations that might entail, and thought that this might lead to other types of existential conversations than those I was most familiar with. There is a danger, if one may call it that, of habitual reinforcement when one is talking with someone who shares the same or similar outlook. I thought I could probably learn more if I was challenged by someone who did not have the same preconceptions about reality as myself. Alas! Buddhists would have to suffice.

Although I might have had good reasons for wanting a different type of experience for my practice period, I should probably work a bit on my own prejudgment about Buddhists if I want to be a Buddhist chaplain. My reaction might also illustrate my slight queasiness about identifying as anything when entering into these meetings. The moment you admit to being a member of something, there is a lot you might be asked to answer for, to explain, to defend. And to be a defender of Buddhism is not really a role I usually long to embody.

Faith is at the heart of many religions, and depending on how one defines it, one could probably say that it is at the heart of the lives of many people who do not really identify as

religious at all. It could be argued that one needs to believe that things will get better, or at least that doing something will be better than doing nothing, in order to follow any purpose in life, however mundane. Although I also believe that things may get better if I apply myself to positive things, my Buddhism is more about the healing and insight that can come when accepting and letting go. As the Buddhist image of the man who wants to cross the river and finds a boat tells us, the goal is not Buddhism itself, it is freedom. When you have crossed the river, the boat is better left behind. Trying to bring it with you will only be a burden. In Buddhism, eventually everything must be left behind — even Buddhism itself.

I cannot, however, presuppose that my Buddhism is that of another. Roloff suggests that, “[i]n spiritual care it is important to be sensible when people express a need for religious care or spirituality, especially when it comes to dealing with existential crises, death and dying. Religion gives orientation to many people. When the question of what comes after death – or not – arises, it is difficult to be ideologically neutral and to ignore religion.”<sup>43</sup> The encounters I had were not with people in very dramatic life situations, such as one might meet when working as a chaplain in a hospital or prison. We were all in a sense experiencing a dramatic situation due to the recent outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, and some of those who contacted me were interested in talking about how Buddhism could help in the current situation. Most, it seemed, were however more interested in talking about Buddhism and their own Buddhist practice, which is of course understandable when Buddhism itself places so much emphasis on this and the Buddhist centre that was hosting my encounters advertises me as a lama and someone with much knowledge about Buddhist practice and meditation.

### *The lama*

As Lartey stated, “being an official religious representative does not automatically confer pastoral ability.”<sup>44</sup> It may however have an impact on the expectations carried into the encounter. It was my experience that the interplay of my own expectations about my role and the ones I felt those who came to see me had, was quite instrumental in how the meetings developed. And I believe I tended to be concerned that my role as an authority would mostly hamper the encounter. The ideal I had in mind, partly inspired my the approach of the

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43. Roloff (2023: 69)

44. Lartey (2003: 27)

threefold purity, was for myself and the one I was meeting to meet with as few plans and preconceptions as possible, a *tabula rasa*, and then see where the conversation would lead us. Quite a demanding expectation of non-expectation to put in place. I do not think in retrospect that me being perceived as an official religious representative was that much of an issue.

I have been presented as a *lama* in the official programmes (website and brochures) of Karma Tashi Ling for the past three-four years after returning from my extended retreat-stay in Nepal. It is not an official title I have received, but in light of my experience both with regard to previous in-depth studies of Buddhism within a monastery environment, and especially the several years I spent in retreat, the head lama at Karma Tashi Ling, Lama Changhub Tsering, has instructed the sangha to refer to me as lama in the official programmes. One of the papers I wrote for my course work in the first year of the LES-programme was about *the lama*, what type of title it is and how it may be a slightly misunderstood word seeing that it is so prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism that this branch of Buddhism was in fact labelled “Lamaism” by the early researchers of the 19th and 20th centuries. I do not have space to go into all the details here, but in short, it is a translation of the Sanskrit word *guru*, it traditionally referred to a personal instructor of Buddhism and not an official position within a hierarchy, but has in more recent times become more synonymous with a Tibetan Buddhist priest of sorts. It is also of course strongly associated with figures such as the Dalai Lama.

A lama is however not the same as a chaplain. As a lama one is primarily expected to be able to instruct a student in their approach to the Buddhist path in general and in meditation techniques in particular. And although it is expected that the lama cares for the student, a lama-student relationship or encounter is not primarily one that deals with the personal crisis situations of the student, or discussions about more existential matters. I do not believe that the role of a lama and of a chaplain are in conflict with each other, but being viewed as a lama will put certain expectations in place that it is worthwhile being conscious of. The same may of course be said about a Christian priest, or any role that implies a sense of authority. The power dynamics that are naturally activated in such cases should not be underestimated, and a chaplain that is aware that they are being viewed as an authority should probably be a little bit extra vigilant about the influence they might have.

### *The expert*

Having studied Buddhism quite extensively it can be difficult for me to stop myself from jabbering on when I am asked to explain a particular concept or approach. There were a few times during my chaplaincy sessions that I suddenly realised that I was taking up quite a bit more space with my explanations than I had been planning. In my defence, and as far as I remember, it did not happen without me actually being asked to explain something, but I do believe that I can get a bit verbose when I feel that something deserves to be understood properly. I did not receive any negative feedback on this particular aspect of how the meetings I had progressed, but it was among the experiences I took from my fieldwork that, given the tendency I have, it might be beneficial that I remain conscious of my tendency to act the expert.

Through her fieldwork on Buddhist chaplains at work, Sanford observed that “the mundane Buddhist magic of not-knowing helped many of the chaplains [she] interviewed remain open to all sorts of ideas and beliefs, including concepts of divinity, ideas about others, and their own self-conceptions, which also helped them grow into themselves as authentic Buddhist chaplains.”<sup>45</sup> *Not-knowing* is, as I have been discussing above, one way to express the overall approach of the threefold purity that I am suggesting may be characteristic of Buddhist chaplaincy, or that one may attempt to aspire to if the Buddhist approach is one that one wishes to let enrich one’s interactions. I have myself used it almost as a mantra when entering into conversations so as to remind myself not to become too active, but leave space for my conversation partner, as well as space for the unexpected. When in the role of a Buddhist chaplain my role is not to teach the other about Buddhism, and to tell them what is the “correct” Buddhist way to go about things. Not to end up in that role could be quite demanding when those who contacted me were mostly members of the same Buddhist organisation, had the impression I was a lama, and were, as I believe many converts are, quite keen to learn how to fit into or practice the religion or tradition properly. But to refuse to answer questions and pretend I did not know the answers to the things, would also have been quite absurd. As one (at least I) always does, I failed in the ideals I had set for myself. If I had not, I guess they would not be ideals at all.

I tend to believe that understanding is most often the key that can lead to healing and

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45. Sanford (2019: 198)

change. But I am also certain that understanding may come in unexpected ways, and that it will not arrive automatically from the explanations of so-called experts. When asked, I will probably still indulge in the pleasures of explaining something I believe I understand. I cannot escape who I am, at least for the time being, and therefore need reminders to help me keep an open mind to the fact that, according to Buddhism, I am a samsaric being still stuck in the mire of confusion and ignorance (*avidyā*). Per definition, I do not (*a*) know (*vidyā*). Still, it remains my goal to become an expert in *not knowing*.

### 3.3 An attempt to apply the Buddhist ideal in practice

#### *The fellow being*

*“What people really long for in the pulpit is to be in the presence of a man or woman of faith.” We can apply that same statement to the caring minister as well. What people in pain truly long for is to be in the presence of a man or woman of faith, a person who truly believes that God can and will help.<sup>46</sup>*

Butler concludes that it is in essence the chaplain’s faith in God that provides the healing the care seeker will experience. What is a non-theistic Buddhist chaplain to do? Should one perhaps just enter Sanford’s *as-if [God exists] space* and hope for the best?<sup>47</sup> These questions go to the core of what chaplaincy is, and what it may be. Can anyone provide chaplaincy care, or does Lartey’s suggestion that there needs to be a recognition of “a transcendent dimension to human life” in chaplaincy mean that some degree of “religious experience” is needed, whatever that may be. If chaplaincy, as the LES-programme is envisaging, is to become a service that can potentially provide for the needs of individuals of all religions and of no religion, the question of what one is providing needs to be asked. As my sub-heading here implies, one such service that chaplaincy may provide, and which I believe is present in most explanations and descriptions of chaplaincy that I have come across my studies, is to be a *fellow being*. Someone who is there for the express purpose of just *being there* for someone.

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46. Butler (2004: 27)

47. See section 2.2.

They are not there to cure a physical or psychological illness. They are not there to help one with any particular practical matter in life. For a Christian, such a presence may be best expressed through faith in God. If the chaplain and the care seeker share this faith, there will, I am sure, be an understanding between them that this presence that the chaplain provides is also the presence of God, that they are “a vessel through whom the Holy Spirit can operate.”<sup>48</sup> For others it will be expressed differently. For a Buddhist it might simply be called *compassion*, as we saw Simmer-Brown expressing it: “We are left, in Buddhist terms, in open space, in a realm of emptiness in which we recognize that relative concepts cannot accurately describe the nature of our relationship with our dialogue partner. On an absolute level, we are joined by our mutual and distinct experiences of no reference point: on an (sic.) relative level, we experience in that vast space the warmth and wildness of our mutual humanity, which Buddhists call compassion.”<sup>49</sup>

### *The bodhisattva*

*To calm my own suffering and to calm the suffering of others,  
I therefore offer myself to others and adopt others as myself.*<sup>50</sup>

The above is a description of the ultimate compassionate act a bodhisattva will engage in, found in the seminal Mahayana Buddhist treatise *Entering the Way of a Bodhisattva* composed in the 8th century. It describes the training of exchanging oneself for others, in a sense a training in empathy, where the bodhisattva trainee employs mental techniques that allows them to truly experience (or take upon themselves) the suffering of others, and to give away all the genuine happiness that they may possess. One such very practical technique often taught in Tibetan Buddhist centres is to visualise all the pain and suffering of all sentient beings as thick, sticky black smoke that one gathers in front and breaths in through one’s nostrils. The smoke travels down to one’s heart which is wrapped in a thick cover of

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48. Butler (2004: 26)

49. Simmer-Brown (2000: 320)

50. From the Mahayana Buddhist Classic *Bodhicaryāvatāra (Entering the Way of a Bodhisattva)* VIII 136; quoted in Roloff (2023: 69).

selfishness, breaks the cover open, and out streams light of compassion that one then spreads to all the beings, providing them with relief and happiness. In Buddhism it is the mistaken sense of self, the ego (*ātman*), and selfishness that is the source of samsara and the suffering that we all experience. In order to reach buddhahood, the bodhisattva therefore trains to undo this ego, this selfishness, and develop genuine compassion. And in the Mahayana genuine compassion is transcendent compassion, a compassion that no longer distinguishes between the compassionate one and the one cared for: a compassion in which the three spheres have been purified. To truly practice this compassion, therefore, one must also practice the threefold purity. Or one must in fact come to realise the reality of the threefold purity: that ultimately there are no self and other.

### *The chaplain*

This is admittedly a high bar to clear. Am I in fact suggesting here that a Buddhist chaplain needs to be a superhuman? This is not my intention. We have ideals in order to have something to strive towards. And perhaps we have religions in order to have something transcendent to orient our lives towards? Simmer brown makes a suggestion:

*Whether we speak from the tradition of the Zen mondo or of the Tibetan rnam thar, dialogues occur in the groundless environment in which we cannot say that our position is the same or different from that of our dialogue partner. Authentic exchanges dawn when the presuppositions concerning the relationship begin to break down. Of course, such encounters are exceedingly rare. Concepts abound in dialogue situations, and it takes great commitment, penetration, trust, and openness for us to give up our concepts in dialogue encounters. But, if we hold the view that this view of pluralism is the most conducive atmosphere in which to conduct dialogue, we then have an avenue along which to travel in order to open up the dialogue relationship.<sup>51</sup>*

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51. Simmer-Brown (2000 :327)



If we allow ourselves to be truly present with the one we are meeting, are able to begin to let go of our presuppositions about who we are or should be as care providers, about our roles and positions, and invite a sense of transcendence into the conversation, this may I believe help chaplains improve the way we meet those individuals that come to us seeking relief.

## 4. Concluding Remarks

This project and thesis has been a very personal journey for me where I have exposed experiences and details about myself that I might not be exclusively comfortable with are in the public domain. Especially when, as in this case, I have made them part of the research material for a topic I am personally invested in. To help me approach and think about this conundrum I have employed the scientific genre of autoethnography, that provides a framework for appreciating how this kind of direct involvement and personal exposure of the researcher may lead to valuable insights about positionality and the research process itself. The approach seemed especially appropriate in a thesis such as this, where the researcher is himself a Buddhist chaplain studying the nature and dynamics of human encounters. It is a genre that is hard to pull off, as it places a great demand on the researcher's ability to express their experiences and feelings in a way more akin to that of a creative writer than that of a scientific author. I do not believe my descriptions here have much literary value, but the genre itself provided the room and freedom to approach the topic in the manner I believe was most useful in this particular case.

I set out to propose the *threefold purity (trimaṇḍalapariśuddha)* as a useful framework for how one may fundamentally understand Buddhist chaplaincy from the perspective of Buddhism itself, and not just as a particular variant of a well-established field of chaplaincy with some Buddhist "spice" on top. Bringing into my text the suggestions and opinions of mostly Christian and Buddhist chaplains, I have tried to show how this framework may be found in Buddhist chaplaincy as it has already been practiced for several decades, without having necessarily been explicitly described in that way. I have also suggested how it may provide Buddhist chaplains with a more direct philosophical foundation in Buddhist teachings for how they can implement their trade. To illustrate this I have used my own experiences, mainly from the practical part of the LES-programme where I (due to the constraints placed upon me by the Covid-19 pandemic) provided an online chaplaincy service for the members of the Buddhist organisation which I have been part of for many years.

Apart from the experiences this process has given me, and which I hope I may invest further in a role as a Buddhist chaplain in Norway, I believe that my investigations may inform the field of Buddhist chaplaincy in particular by strengthening the identity (but not, of

course, the ego-clinging) of the field within chaplaincy. And by illustrating what Buddhist chaplaincy brings to the common table, my contribution may then, in turn, strengthen the common field and family of both sectarian and non-sectarian chaplaincy.

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## 6. Appendices

### Appendix 1: Letter to the Karma Tashi Ling (KTL) sangha board

Hei Anne,

(copy to Lama Changchub; sorry, this is all in Norwegian – just to let you know of the communication)

Jeg snakket med Lama Changchub i helgen om måter jeg kanskje kunne bidra litt i KTL nå i situasjonen vi har. Han har foreslått at jeg kunne skrive noen korte tekster som kunne sendes ut i sanghaen, med temaer som hengivenhet, forgjengelighet, osv. Han sier at det ville vært fint om jeg skrev disse siden jeg kan skrive direkte på norsk. Jeg har sagt ja til dette, og kommer til å forsøke og skrive noe jevnlig. Men jeg har ikke kommet i gang fordi jeg har vært så dårlig form nå helt siden søndag. Det er nok ikke corona, men bare vanlige migrene-symptomer som jeg får fra tid til annen, i varierende grad. Noen ganger som nå, varer det i dagesvis og jeg blir helt utslitt.

Men, det er en annen og relatert ting jeg også ville spørre om, og som kanskje må vurderes av styret. Jeg vet ikke. Men jeg snakket også med Lama Changchub om dette, han syntes det var en god ide, og ba meg skrive til deg først.

Jeg går som jeg kanskje har nevnt (husker ikke om jeg har nevnt det for deg) på et masterstudium pe teologisk fakultet på UiO som heter Lederskap, etikk og samtalepraksis (<https://www.uio.no/studier/program/les-master/>). Tanken med studiet er i hovedsak at det i Norge i fremtiden vil bli mer og mer behov for at sjelesorg og samtalepraksis i forhold til eksistensielle spørsmål også kan tilbys av andre enn prester, som jo stort sett fortsatt er normen. Og for min egen del følte det som en mulighet for meg å finne en måte å bruke erfaringen jeg nå forhåpentligvis har tillagt meg med mange år med fulltids studier og praksis av buddhisme i en norsk kontekst, og kanskje også kunne gjøre dette til et arbeide.

Planen var at vi skulle ha praksis i et fengsel denne våren, og vi skulle ha begynt med dette for en uke siden. Dette ble selvfølgelig avlyst, og vi forsøker nå å finne en måte å gjøre tiden vi skulle bruke i praksis så nyttig og meningsfull som mulig, og kanskje eventuelt finne erstatninger for praksisen vi går glipp av. I den anledning har jeg tenkt at det kanskje er noe

jeg kunne gjøre i Karma Tashi Ling, og som kanskje på samme tid kunne være nyttig for medlemmene eller andre interesserte. Så det jeg tenker på er altså om det kanskje kunne være mulig å tilby samtaler i regi av Karma Tashi Ling. Det ville jo innebære at det opplyses om at dette er et forsøksprosjekt og en del av min praksis i sammenheng med studiet, og så tenkte jeg at folk kunne ta kontakt med meg og «bestille time». Samtaleformatet tar utgangspunkt i chaplaincy-modellen, som vi kanskje kan kalle sjelesorg på norsk, selv om dette kan være litt misvisende. Det er kanskje bedre å kalle det eksistensielle samtaler, og i og med at det kanskje er i KTL sammenheng se regner jeg jo med at den buddhistiske siden av det er opplagt. Men det trenger for all del ikke handle om buddhisme. Jeg tenker mer at det i disse korona-tider kan være snakk om samtaler for dem som føler seg ekstra isolert og trenger noen å snakke med, om hva det skal være.

Men som sagt, om dette skal være noen KTL går god for så må det vel vurderes av styret først.

Med vennlig hilsen

Fredrik

### Appendix 2: Information from KTL about chaplaincy offer during Covid-19

I disse dager, med Corona-smitten som herjer over hele verden, er mange naturlig nok redde og bekymret.

Lama Changchub minner oss på at vi kan benytte denne vanskelige perioden og transformere den til noe åndelig konstruktivt.

Men det er kanskje ikke alltid så lett å vite hvordan man skal gå frem.

Føler du at du kunne trenge veiledning i din buddhistiske praksis, eller hadde det vært fint å ha noen å lufte tanker og bekymringer med?

KTLBS tilbyr våre medlemmer muligheten til å ha en fortrolig samtale i med to av våre lærere som har lang erfaring med veiledning og fortrolige samtaler.

Samtalen vil foregå i april på telefon eller over nett.

Ani Könchog er ordinert nonne i den tibetanske buddhismen, og har praktisert buddhisme i over 30 år. Hun behersker norsk, engelsk og fransk.

Lama Fredrik Liland har praktisert og studert buddhisme i over 20 år og tar for tiden et masterstudium på teologisk fakultet på UiO i Lederskap, etikk og samtalepraksis.

Studiet fokuserer på eksistensielle samtaler og sjelesorg. Fredriks samtaletilbud i april vil inngå som en del av hans praksisperiode på dette studiet. Han kan tilby samtaler på norsk eller engelsk.

### Appendix 3: My answer to questions raised about research ethics and confidentiality in connection with my chaplaincy work at Karma Tashi Ling Buddhist Society

Selv om jeg jo gjerne vil gjøre dette som et bidrag i situasjonen vi er i, så blir sannsynligvis tilbudet om samtaler for min egen del også en erstatning for den praksisen som jeg skulle ha i et fengsel i disse dager. Men det blir ikke et forskningsprosjekt. Det er en praksisperiode på samme måte som f.eks. en sykepleier har praksis som en del av sin utdanning. Det er ikke slik at jeg skal bruke samtalene direkte i en studie. Tanken er først og fremst å få erfaring med samtalepraksis. Men vi skal dokumentere hva vi har vært igjennom, uten å gå i detalj, så jeg vil trekke generelle erfaringer fra praksisen når jeg skriver en oppgave denne våren.

Studiet stiller noen av de samme kravene til studentene som det gjøres til andre helsefagsutdanningner, og vi har jobbet en del med forskningsetikk og taushetsplikt.