The Installation of the First Buddhist Chaplain at Dalhousie University

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Abstract

"Buddhism in Nova Scotia" describes the current Buddhist landscape in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The Buddhist 'community' in Nova Scotia is, not surprisingly, made up of distinct communities. This became apparent in 2003 when the Chaplaincy Office at Dalhousie University, in the interest of nurturing diversity on campus, tried to recruit a Buddhist Chaplain for the students. After a lengthy meeting, no agreement could be reached among the various groups on how to proceed with the chaplaincy appointment. The difficulty may be illustrated by the following example. Whereas the Shambhala Centre is managed by predominantly lay Euro-Canadians who offer free weekly hour-long Open House introductions to the Centre and a host of programs for young and old, Yunfeng of the Chan Temple, who speaks Putonghua, Cantonese and Vietnamese, is away from Halifax for at least nine months out of the year. When he was invited to speak to students in class at Dalhousie University, he declined and invited the students to visit the temple instead. He noted that his primary work was to practice and not to build a large sangha. This paper explores the diversity in the understanding of mission and its practical implementation in the Buddhist community of Dalhousie University and the city of Halifax.

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Introduction

Before I begin the story of the Chaplaincy Office at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, let me present a brief sketch of Buddhist groups in Halifax. There are seven Buddhist communities, small and large, in the city: Chinese-Vietnamese Ji Jing Si (Solemn Silence Temple); a Chinese-Vietnamese congregation, Eastern Sea Temple; an informal Theravadin group that includes Sri Lankan, Thai and Burmese members; the Atlantic Soto Zen Centre; Waves and Water Sangha, affiliated with Thich Nhat Hanh's Tiep Hien Order of Interbeing; Zen Meditation Support Group; Nyingma and Kagyu affiliated Shambhala Centre (largest Buddhist congregation in Halifax).[1] The first three groups represent primarily immigrant communities, whereas the last four are made up of Euro-North American converts.

I have spoken with both Yun-Feng Shi-fu of the Ji Jing Si and Jian-Ming Fa-shi of the Eastern Sea Temple: neither feels they speak English well enough to feel comfortable with Dalhousie students on their own, even though Jian-Ming holds a degree in Civil Engineering from Germany. They both would prefer to work with a translator. The Theravadin group is very small and does not have a resident monk. And neither Jim Smith of the Soto Zen group nor Sylvia McCormick of the Zen Meditation Support Group has the desired academic qualifications for the office. Sharon Price of the Shambhala Centre has attended meetings at the Chaplaincy Office: interest has been indicated by questions about the application process for recommending one of their members for consideration, but they are undergoing a change in administration and have not pursued this actively.[2] It is Dr. Bethan Lloyd, Research Coordinator for the Racism, Violence, and Health Project at Dalhousie, who has been accepted as a Buddhist chaplain; she is the Lay Elder for the Waves and Water Sangha from Thich Nhat Hanh's Tien Hiep Order of Interbeing.

The Story

The story of the installation of the Buddhist Chaplain at Dalhousie is also a story of the contemporary world writ large, interwoven and interdependent, an illustration of *śunyatā*. It is about disparate pieces of Asia, Europe and North America coalescing in Halifax. So let me start in Halifax.

Dalhousie's Lutheran Chaplain, Clement Mehlman, was and continues to be a major player in the appointment of Bethan Lloyd to the position of Associate Chaplain for Engaged Zen practice on campus in April 2005. As Bethan tells it, "The Buddhists wouldn't have met" if it had not been for Clement's initiative. I met Clement in the fall of 2002 when I first arrived at

Dalhousie to teach in the Comparative Religion department. He stood out immediately, to my mind exceptionally, as the Christian Chaplain who was friendly to and interested in Buddhist meditation. In the winter of 2003 he joined the students in the World Religions and Buddhism courses at the Ji Jing Si (Solemn Silence Temple) on Windsor Street with Yun-Feng Shi-fu (Master Yun-Feng) for a two-hour session. I found this enthusiasm for Buddhist meditation peculiar in a Lutheran chaplain: I kept wondering as I was interviewing him on May 3rd, 2005, and after I had spoken with Bethan on May 18th, whether his commitment to bringing Buddhists together was not just a little strange in a Christian chaplain. I kept asking myself whether he was not working against himself and his Lutheran church in encouraging Buddhism.[3]

It soon became clear, during my interview with him, that there have been numerous influences on Clement's thinking that are reflected in his actions. For one, he directed me to an interfaith website for the Center for Religious Experience and Study (CRES). He then mentioned theologian Paul Knitter who appeals to the faithful of all traditions to develop their willingness to worship with others from different faiths[4] Thus Clement's enthusiasm for Buddhism began to fall into place.

Eventually I also found out that Clement had taken a course on interfaith dialogue with Prof. Suwanda Sugunasiri at Trinity College (University of Toronto), and that he had been struck by how inclusive the University of Toronto chaplaincy was. It became clear that Clement, the Lutheran chaplain who brought the Haligonian Buddhists together, was acting in a way that is consistent with a particular late 20th century Christian ethos. For example, in a manner that that recalls Kukai and Tsung-mi's inclusion of Vedic Religion, Confucianism and Daoism in the late 9th century, Reverend Vern Barnet, working in the Kansas City area, created in 1982 the Center for Religious Experience and Study (CRES) that includes numerous religions: one of its first interfaith councils included the participation of American Indian, Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian Catholic, Christian Protestant, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Universalist Unitarian, Wiccan and Zoroastrian devotees. Barnet's scheme reads to me like a Christian version of doctrinal categorization. According to the CRES website:

He (Barnet) recognized that most people were unaware of the religious diversity within the community, and that prejudice impeded the understanding of shared values. He created avenues for interfaith dialog and education. All faiths pursue the holy - what has ultimate worth, supreme value - and their different expressions of it can enlarge the perspectives we have of our own faiths.[5]

And the motto of CRES is:

Primal Faiths: restored with nature
Asian Faiths: the self-made whole
Monotheistic Faiths: relationships reclaimed
Liberation Movements: finding the sacred afresh

From such a perspective, then, working to bring at least one Buddhist chaplain into a university in Halifax, Canada, where 52 out of 2,000 students self-identified as Buddhists makes sense.

The Toronto connection to the Chaplaincy appointment does not end here. Sylvia McCormick or Samso, a student of Toronto's Samu Sunim of the Zen Buddhist Temple from the Korean Son tradition, also has a part in the establishing of Bethan as the chaplain.[6] Bethan met Sylvia four and a half years ago in 2000 when she saw the posters for Zen meditation that Sylvia had put up. Sylvia, who had grown up in Halifax as a Roman Catholic, had just returned in 1997 from Toronto where she had been ordained a lay Zen Buddhist priest. Her story offers yet another layer of interconnectedness. Sylvia started practicing Tai Chi many years ago at the Taoist Tai Chi Centre, where her instructor John Panter[7] introduced her to the *Diamond Sutra* and Buddhism. From there she went on to study and practice with Samu Sunim in Toronto and it was there that she met the Lutheran Reverend Tim Dutcher-Walls, who told her to look up Clement when she arrived back in Halifax. Clement tells me that he first spoke with Sylvia in 1997, but that the structure to bring in a Buddhist chaplain was not yet in place. In 1998, there was a concerted effort to set down the nature and parameters of the Chaplaincy Office, and a document which in part outlined the procedure for application by faith groups to establish a chaplaincy at Dalhousie was drafted. *Structure and Guidelines of the Dalhousie Chaplaincy Office: A Statement of Consensus by the Chaplains on the Ecumenical and Interfaith Ministry at Dalhousie* is the fruit of this effort.

Getting the Procedure Started

In my interview with her in May of 2005 Bethan told me that the first time she and Samso met, Samso immediately suggested that Bethan should apply to be the Buddhist Chaplain at Dalhousie. Samso herself knew that without a university degree, it did not matter that she was interested; that she had the "relational skills, compassion, entrepreneurial spirit, self-discipline, a life of prayer and/or meditation practice"[8] which the Chaplaincy Office asked for; and that she had a credible lineage "with a substantial tradition and representation"[9] through Samu Sunim; she simply did not qualify because of

a lack of post-secondary accreditation. Bethan recalled Samso saying that her academic qualifications (Bethan has a doctorate) would make her an ideal candidate for a Buddhist chaplaincy at Dalhousie. Samso's estimation of the situation is corroborated by Section D in *Structure and Guidelines of the Dalhousie Chaplaincy Office: A Statement of Consenus by the Chaplains on the Ecumenical and Interfaith Ministry at Dalhousie*, which reads:

Chaplains working in an academic institution require professional preparation for the university community. Universities are generally stringent on matters of educational qualifications. As chaplains, they must honour the host by their academic credentials and perhaps even their achievements in publishing and research as is normative in the institution in which they are situated. This means that chaplains have training and education in the area of theology, ministry, interfaith dynamics, pastoral counselling, or other fields relative to the task.[10]

Bethan is sensitive to the issues of representation, privilege and exclusion in relation to some of the other groups in the city; and even though the mandate of the Chaplaincy Office at the University is not to represent the city, but rather to support the student body, Bethan is conscious of the absence of the ethnic Buddhist communities (whom she calls cultural Buddhists). And she is fully aware that she does not represent the Buddhism of foreign students. Thus she understands one part of her mandate to reach out to other congregations, encouraging participation and creating space for them at the university.

The student body at Dalhousie is overwhelmingly Christian. It should therefore come as no surprise that all six of the Dalhousie Chaplains are Christian representing the denominations of Anglican, Baptist, Christian Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and United Churches. On the other hand, all three Associate Chaplains are non-Christian: that is, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim. As an elaboration of 'Buddhist,' Bethan has chosen to include her 'denomination' as Engaged Zen; this is seemingly a small point, but reflects an alternative way in the naming of 'others.' Clement observed that while the Christian chaplains are known by their sectarian affiliation, they are not often viewed as a homogenous, undifferentiated whole. Yet there is little hesitation for most on the university campus to speak generally about the Buddhists, the Muslims, and/or the Jews with apparent lack of awareness of the divergent communities within each tradition, even when they know better. That said, it is nevertheless true that there have been significant changes in the *Structure and Guidelines of the Dalhousie Chaplaincy Office* from its inception in 1998 to its revision in 2005. That is, two non-Judeo-Christian clergy have been added to the chaplaincy office, namely Jamal Badawi, a Sunni imam,[11] and Bethan. This change in membership and

Bethan's insistence on specialized nomenclature marks an important departure from the wholly Judeo-Christian constituency and perspective of the Chaplaincy Office in 1998.

The Meaning of Chaplaincy and Its Suitability to Buddhism

Chaplaincy is a Christian idea and I questioned the suitability of it when applied to traditional Buddhism. When speaking with Sylvia, I asked what she associated with a chaplain: she answered prefacing her remarks by saying that her understanding of the word is likely informed by her childhood Roman Catholicism. She saw a chaplain as a spiritual counsellor who deals with doctrinal questions and issues on ethics, propagates or models values within a tradition and also directs students to the appropriate person when she is unable to help.

When I spoke with Jian Ming at his residence in Hacketts Cove, I voiced my unease with the notion of a Buddhist chaplain, given what I understand to be the Buddhist focus on non-attachment, contemplation and finding stillness as means to an end to suffering. In response, he talked about two things: the bodhisattva path and skilful means. Jian Ming noted that Buddhism is from Asia and has not been in North America very long; that it has not yet been integrated and that language remains a problem. For that reason it may be difficult in the beginning to transmit the teachings. As for the Buddhist Chaplaincy Office appointment, he saw it as an institutional issue, a question of infrastructure and how that might serve organizational needs. He saw nothing wrong with 'discussion,' 'persuasion' and 'missionizing,' the elements that Sylvia described and I found troublesome. Where I tended to the wholesale rejection of missionary work, he drew the line at conflict and felt that a chaplain could use the opportunity given by her office to lead people from attachment to detachment, to dissolve conflict (無諍 wuzheng). Missionizing and arguments that resulted in hurt feelings, however, should be avoided. In Chan, he explained, it is said that one should "abandon no *fa* (dharma, strategy, teaching, method), be attached to no *fa*, and to open doors and pathways" (不捨一法 不執一法 打開門路 *bushe yifa, buzhi yifa, dakai menlu*).

Bethan would make an excellent chaplain, Jian Ming added. He had met her previously when she had driven down from Halifax to meditate with him and thought that she had cultivated a solid practice. With regards to my hesitation about the suitability of the Chaplaincy Office to Buddhism he said simply: "In Buddhism, no single method is abandoned" (佛法門中 不捨一法 *fofa menzhong bushe yifa*). Jian Ming then went on to explain the expression "the sound beyond the music" or "meaning beyond hearing" (弦外之音

xianwai zhi yin) through the story of a lady who calls her maid several times, not because she needed anything, but simply so that the young man she fancies will know her voice. (頻呼小玉原無事 只為檀郎認得聲 *pinhu xiaoyu yuan wushi zhiwei tanlang rende sheng*)

In the same way, he explained, the meaning or function of the call is not what it appears to be, and that the 'real' meaning can only be experienced or understood (體會/印証 tihui/yinzheng) by the young man himself. Working as a chaplain, thereby taking the bodhisattva path, is therefore a means through which to play some music, or call a maid, so to speak. While a Theravadin monk might choose not to involve himself in the dusty world of chaplaincy work, Jian Ming said he saw no reason why Mahayana monastic and laypeople would refuse. He continued to say that intention and the ensuing action are both important. Sometimes the action may not seem 'correct.' But, he suggested, as in Chinese medicine, small doses of 'poisonous' substances are sometimes used to fight disease, in this way also means and strategies may sometimes look unpalatable.[12] In the end, he said, there is no self, no other, no sentient beings, no life and death (無我 無他 無眾生 無壽者*wuwo wuta wuzhongseng wushouzhe*).

Clement's understanding of chaplaincy is similar to both Sylvia and Jian Ming's. When I asked about the history of missionizing out of my discomfort at the International Student Ministry ESL Bible Discussion Groups that work on the Dalhousie campus, he referred me to Appendix I of *Structure and Guidelines*, "Statement on Proselytizing Activities,"[13] that speak to aggressive religious recruiting. He said sternly that aggressive missionizing is simply not acceptable. On the question of doctrine, he noted that he always referred students back to teachers within their own denomination. When asked if he understood chaplaincy as counselling, he answered "No," and indicated that he would direct students who need counselling to the Counselling Services. He also did not see himself in the capacity of pastoral care. Rather, he spoke about "problem solving" and mentioned Margaret Guenther's *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*,[14] and talked about being available to others and being empty.

It may be helpful here to step back and reflect on the Chaplaincy Office in the broader university context. It is written in Section A of *Structure and Guidelines of the Dalhousie Chaplaincy Office* that the office

> operates in accord with the founding principles of Dalhousie University as a college that would be open to all people regardless of class or creed. George Ramsay, then Ninth Earl of Dalhousie…expressed this vision in his letter of 1817 to Lord Bathurst: 'The gates of the University were open to all persons

> indiscriminately from whatever country they may come, or to whatever mode of faith or worship they are attached.'[15]

Furthermore, Ramsay again explicitly affirmed that the University was "founded on the principles of religious tolerance." And, "Since education gives attention to students' well-rounded development, attention to spiritual development is an important aspect of well-being, and hence the University makes available this Office."[16] In our time, as Clement explains, the Chaplaincy Office is part of Student Services.

When I spoke with Bethan about her understanding of what a chaplain is, she agreed with Clement's notion of "holy listening." In her tradition, she said, it would be called "deep listening." When I broached the subject of individual cultivation and non-attachment as I had with Jian Ming, she remarked that for the Tiep Hien Order of Interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh talked about "Sangha eyes"— that is, discovering and cultivating self by "living in community," through meditation, and individual discovery. She agreed with Jian Ming's characterization of chaplaincy as institutional support for practice, and spoke to the opportunity of offering guidance along the path as an Elder.

Most importantly, she saw two primary elements in her role as Associate Chaplain: To support and encourage interfaith cooperation through initiatives; and to act as a resource to students regarding questions they might have about Buddhism or about their practice. Like Clement, she did not see herself as a spiritual counsellor. Rather, she saw herself as a spiritual friend, adding that she definitely did not see herself as a guru. When asked by Martha Martin, the United Church Chaplain, if she intended to use her position to build a sangha, she answered "No." On the sensitive issue of interfaith 'poaching' and students who feel alienated from their own traditions, Bethan notes that Thich Nhat Hanh recommends a returning to and a strengthening of one's spiritual roots.

Here again, Bethan and Clement agreed on not recruiting vulnerable students out of their traditions. Clement quoted Rabbi Saul Aranov, who was part of the team that developed the original document in 1998 – 2000, who used different words but expressed a similar idea to Bethan's. Rabbi Aranov spoke about "returning people to their tradition." When I questioned the sense of this 'return', pointing out for example, that Europeans and North Americans have not always been Christians, Clement gave no answer. When I pressed him, he asked what my question was; and when I pressed him further, he burst out laughing and characterized chaplaincy as a subversive activity, playing on the title of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's 1969 book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* – to which he immediately followed

by saying solemnly that "of course, chaplaincy could be seen as a conserving activity as well," echoing Postman's 1979 book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*.

Bethan, on the other hand, answered more straightforwardly: what she meant by "roots" referred to the recent history of the family's faith – for example, to the faith of the grandparents. When I asked further if the Chan question of "What is your face before you were born?" has any part in the return to and strengthening of roots, she shook her head and said "No, it is more concrete than that – it is about losing the habit energies of hungry ghosts." Bethan further noted the difference between her own tradition and the view held by Foguangshan (according to one of the nuns at the Toronto Foguangshan Buddhist temple) that social work is for laypeople and that the clergy should concentrate on meditation practice. She said that while she believed that "all people have the ability to think, speak, and act in mindfulness, not all of them will be Buddhist, and not all of them will engage in social justice/social work activities. If people who do engage in social engagement do not practice mindfulness, then they may lose their compassion."[17] She went on to say that some people have criticized Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings as "Buddhism Lite"– as in lightweight – "because of their focus on mindfulness in the everyday activities of living in families, communities, nations, and in the world rather than their focus on the individual practice of extended sitting meditation or esoteric teachings."[18] For her, it is exactly these 'lite' teachings that form the bodhisattva path in practice and not just in theory.

Concluding Remarks

My story of the installation of a Buddhist Chaplain at Dalhousie in April, 2005 reflects continuing change in Nova Scotia. The story happens at the intersections of the Nova Scotian population at large, the student population at the university, and the specific ethnic and western Buddhist communities within them. In close to the three years that I have been in Halifax, there have been subtle changes at the University and the city. Even as the debate about immigration – a perennial one in Nova Scotia, I learnt – rolls on in the media, I have begun to see increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the classroom and on the street. For example, three new Southeast Asian restaurants have opened up during my time at Dalhousie: Sichuanese, Vietnamese and Thai. These new arrivals may in turn, of course, affect the religious demographics of the city.

On the academic side, I had for the first two years in the city taken students who are studying Buddhism for temple visits to the main Buddha

Hall and Shrine Room at the Shambhala Centre on Tower Road, a fifteen to twenty minute walk from the University; and to Ji Jing Si on Windsor Street, about a half-hour walk away. This year, for the first time, I was able to bring the students from the Buddhism class for a visit to a Japanese tearoom at the Shambhala Centre so that they might experience *chanoyu* (???), the Way of Tea, as an expression of spiritual discipline, for themselves. Tea masters John Soyu McGee Sensei and Alexandre Soro Avdoulov Sensei[19] arrived in Halifax in 2000 after over twenty years of studying tea in Japan. The Shambhala website informs us:

> In 2002, McGee Sensei and Avdoulov Sensei presented Shambhala with a gift of an interior tea room, constructed in Japan and shipped to Nova Scotia in pieces to be assembled on site. The tea room was built in the Halifax Shambhala Centre and officially "opened" by the Sakyong on November 13, 2004. He chose the name *Yukoan* for the tea room, which means Abode of the Equable Tiger.[20]

Here is globalization writ local. A Russian, an Ontarian and a Tibetan are at the heart of the establishment of the Yukoan, a Japanese tearoom, in a western secularized Buddhist centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The Shambhala Centre is itself the product of a globalized Buddhism and integrates the secular path of the Shambhala Warrior with Zen aesthetics and discipline. This is a far cry from Bethan's Engaged Zen, but it is Buddhism nonetheless.

The story will rest here for now, at the point of diversity. There are clearly different Buddhist groups in the community, and as the student body at the University changes, and as Nova Scotia also changes, we should not be surprised to see more Buddhist chaplains at Dalhousie University in the future.

NOTES

1 See *http://bouddhisme.buddhismcanada.com/Ns.html* for details on these groups, except Eastern Sea.

2 Bethan Lloyd noted that the Shambhala members did not attend the May 7th meeting this year.

3 Clement is careful to emphasize that he is not unusual and that the other chaplains have been fully supportive of his efforts with the Buddhists.

4 Paul Knitter wrote the introduction to John B. Cobb's *Transforming Christianity and the World:*
A Way beyond Absolutism and Relativism (Orbis Books, 1999), and was an editor, with John Hicks, for the series, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness:*

Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions (Orbis Books, ca. 1988).

[5] *http://www.cres.org/mission.htm#6* (accessed May 21, 2005).

[6] In an ironic twist, Sylvia McCormick has not been successful in establishing a sangha in Halifax. She has been running meditation groups in her apartment since she has returned from Toronto, but is currently teaching yoga and deliberating on her commitment to teaching Buddhadharma.

[7] John Panter was a student of Master Moy Lin-shin, from Toronto's Fung Loy Kok Temple and Taoist Tai Chi Association.

[8] *http://as01.ucis.dal.ca/chaplaincy/PDFS/ChapGuide.pdf* , p. 5 (accessed May 21, 2005)

[9] Ibid.

[10] *http://as01.ucis.dal.ca/chaplaincy/PDFS/ChapGuide.pdf*, p. 5 (accessed May 21, 2005)

[11] Dr. Jamal Badawi, who teaches in the Faculty of Management at St. Mary's University in Halifax, is identified simply as the Imam for the Muslim constituency. He met with Susan McIntyre, the Director of Student Resources, in 2000. As of June 2005, Perwaiz Hayat, an ABD doctoral candidate at McGill's Institute of Islamic Studies, and an Ismaili active in interfaith dialogue in Montreal, has accepted a ten-month contract in the Comparative Religion department at Dalhousie University.

[12] The notion of 'poisonous' is related to portion, degree and strategic use.

[13] *Structure and Guidelines of the Dalhousie Chaplaincy Office*, 11

[14] The Reverend Margaret Guenther is a famous Episcopalian minister who works in the U.S. *http://www.mindevelopers.org/About.html* (accessed May 22, 2005).

[15] *Structure and Guidelines of the Dalhousie Chaplaincy Office*, 3

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Quoted from e-mail correspondence on 23 May, 2005.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] John McGee is an Ontarian who worked at Expo 67 in Montreal, then went to Japan with the Canadian government and did not return to Canada until 2000, settling in Nova Scotia. They also hold tea ceremonies at their home in Lunenberg. Alexandre Avdoulov is from Russia and is currently teaching Japanese language at St. Mary's University.

[20] *http://www.halifax.shambhala.org/arts_kalapa_cha.html* (accessed May 23, 2005)

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