

Mindfulness in Chaplaincy: From the Perspective of a Buddhist Priest

Fuminobu Komura

Chaplain Resident
Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, PA, USA

Synopsis

A chaplain is a professional who provides spiritual care to patients who experience spiritual or emotional pains. Chaplains serve at hospitals, hospices, schools, military and other institutions. A chaplain sits with a person in crisis, creates a safe space for her/him to open her/his heart and supports her/him to face the pains and journey alongside them to find a path to solve them. Attentive listening to what they have to say and acknowledging it is the core of this ministry by a chaplain.

The key attitude of a chaplain is non-anxious, non-judgmental presence. It is to stay here and now with no attachment. There is no agenda or nothing to fix when meeting with a person experiencing emotional or spiritual difficulties. A chaplain sees and accepts the situation of the person as it is and embraces it in her/his heart.

Mindfulness is defined as *The awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose in the present moment without judgement.*¹ Mindfulness enables a chaplain to be fully present in front of a person in crisis. A chaplain pays close attention to the person's state of mind and body, the atmosphere of the room, and at the same time, to the state of mind and body of her/himself. When a patient asks a chaplain a hard question, such as, "Why me?" the chaplain tends to become anxious thinking what to say or what to do. At such a time, the chaplain can be aware of the agony of the patient and uneasiness of her/himself and gently embrace them. This mindfulness helps a chaplain prepare her/himself to be firmly present and evokes loving-kindness and compassion to the other person and self. By this way the chaplain and the patient can create a connection at the heart-to-heart level.

As a hospital chaplain, I have offered mindfulness instruction to patients and family members. I teach them a basic practice of mindfulness with paying attention to breaths. It helps them reduce their stress and they are appreciative. Together with a colleague, I am leading mindfulness meditation sessions twice weekly for the hospital staff. Also I gave a mindfulness presentation to the hospital leadership team. The value of mindfulness has been recognized more and more among the health care providers who work in a stressful environment.

Chaplaincy is my Buddhist path. Serving as a chaplain every day helps me to develop wisdom of non-attachment and loving-kindness and compassion to self and others. Daily meditation of mindfulness supports me to prepare myself as a chaplain. I am appreciative for the encounter to this vocation.

¹ Kabat-Zinn, John. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Bantam Book, 2013.