

Equivalency Issues for Buddhist Candidates for Board Certification
with the Association of Professional Chaplains:
A White Paper

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Please submit questions and suggestions to Chaplain Doug Vardell, BCC, Chair of the Subcommittee for Theological Equivalency Reviews, at djvardell@yahoo.com, or by phone at 269.352.2325.

Preface:

According to the revised Oxford Press *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are over 33,800 denominations of Christian churches. As stunning as this number might be, scholars have estimated there could be even more varieties of Buddhism than of Christianity. Therefore it is difficult to make generalized statements that will apply to all Buddhist candidates for certification with the Association of Professional Chaplains (APC).

Buddhist education and training varies widely between schools (denominations) of Buddhism, and even within schools, between lineages of teachers. (A lineage comprises teachers who can trace their tradition back to the historical Buddha, and who have developed distinctive practices and training styles.) Variations pertinent to the APC's Commission on Certification range from an anti-intellectualism that favors monastic spiritual experience over academic study, to westernized degree programs.

These extremes in Buddhist educational traditions prove challenging for the Commission's Theological Equivalency Committee. The purpose of the Theological Equivalency Committee is to evaluate the education of candidates who have not earned 72 credits in theological and pastoral studies from a graduate school accredited by a member organization of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

The Committee chair has asked the APC's six Board Certified (BCC) Buddhist chaplains to recommend to the Committee wise ways for evaluating Buddhist candidates who have not earned the required 72 credits. The six Buddhist chaplains represent the following Buddhist traditions: Rinzai Zen, Soto Zen, Jodo Shinshu (Pure Land), Tibetan, and Theravada.

These six chaplains have been asked to address three major areas of concern: the graduate theology core requirement, the undergraduate Bachelor's degree requirement, and the educational contribution of meditation and chanting. I have relied heavily upon their responses to formulate the following explanations and recommendations for evaluating Buddhist candidates who do not have the 72 credits in theological and pastoral subjects from a CHEA accredited institution.

I. Graduate Theology Core Requirement

A. The APC requires the equivalent of 72 credits of graduate theological and pastoral studies from an institution accredited by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Traditionally, the Master of Divinity degree on which this requirement is based has been composed of nine core subject areas:

sacred literature,
theology/philosophy,
ritual/liturgy,
religious history,
comparative religions,
religious education,
institutional organization and administration,
pastoral care and counseling,
and spiritual formation.

The purpose of this White Paper is to address the fact that most Buddhist candidates will not have earned an accredited M.Div. or 72 graduate credits. The requirement of 72 credits serves the APC well, and should not be ignored for the sake of inclusiveness. Precisely because religious traditions vary so widely in their training practices, setting a clear single standard serves the cause of professional chaplaincy and facilitates the certification process.

RECOMMENDATION #1: The nine core subject areas of accredited seminary programs shall serve as the standard by which a candidate's educational equivalency request will be measured. This does not mean we are instituting a new requirement that every candidate must show education in all nine subjects. Rather, this means that our current standard of the traditional M.Div. program serves as a sufficient model for evaluating alternative educational programs. The nine subjects serve as a guideline for evaluating the depth and comprehensiveness of the candidate's education.

B. The accredited graduate theological studies requirement might be met by a Buddhist Master's degree program. Such programs appear to cover well the core subjects of sacred literature, religious philosophy and history, ritual/liturgy and spiritual formation (via mentored meditation and/or chanting). What would probably be most lacking in such programs would be pastoral care and counseling, and comparative religions. For example, it is possible that even a Buddhist candidate who trained in the United States received very little formal study of Christian beliefs and practices.

RECOMMENDATION #2: Ask the BCC Buddhist chaplains to evaluate Naropa, Harvard, Berkley, U Cal Santa Barbara, Buddhist Churches of America and other programs to be more clear to what extent each program addresses the nine core subject areas. Also check entrance requirements: if they accept a candidate without an accredited Bachelor's degree, do they evaluate the candidate's education to determine that it is equivalent, as would an accredited institution. Provide results of this evaluation to all members of the Theological Equivalency Committee for their use in evaluating candidates.

C. The graduate theology requirement would likely not be met in many other Buddhist training settings outside the formal academic degree programs. While a candidate from a Tibetan setting would be more likely to have academic mentoring than, say, a candidate from a Zen tradition which promotes spiritual experience, both candidates will need to document the educational components of their training experience. For the APC's purposes, this documentation is necessary even for candidates whose traditions and training have taught them to devalue social recognition such as academic degrees. While the APC respects such beliefs, it is simply not possible for our Equivalency Committee to evaluate a candidate's education apart from detailed documentation backed up by validating documents from the candidate's lineage.

The Theological Equivalency Committee's standard practice for accepting documentation of non-standard educational activities is to focus on the number of hours invested. The Committee utilizes an hours:credit formula especially applicable when the equivalency of the education is debatable or difficult to ascertain,

such as Adult Continuing Education forums and educational internships. The formula states that 100 hours of education yield 1 graduate credit. Therefore, for a candidate to demonstrate an equivalency for 72 graduate credits, the candidate would need to document 7,200 hours of education.

RECOMMENDATION #3: A candidate's training shall be evaluated much like an educational internship: qualified mentors, educational goals, and measurements of attainment. A candidate shall be asked to provide the following in order to document 7,200 hours of education (class time, required study time, mentored practice time, face-to-face interview time, etc.):

1. detailed descriptions of mentored training relating to the 9 core subject areas of the traditional MDiv: sacred literature, theology/philosophy, ritual/liturgy, religious history, comparative religions, religious education, institutional organization and administration, pastoral care and counseling, and spiritual formation
2. explanation of the educational goals and outcomes of their supervised/mentored activities
3. careful estimates of hours of "class time" with a teacher, including face-to-face interview time, supervised practice time, etc.
4. list of sacred literature studied
5. a description of teachers/mentors showing their qualifications
6. printed materials from their community's office describing the retreats and other educational activities in which the candidate participated
7. letters from teachers and mentors validating the candidate's description of their training. If a teacher were willing, it would assist the Committee if the teacher would also offer an evaluation of the candidate's level of educational achievement.

II. Undergraduate Bachelor's Degree Requirement

The APC requires all candidates to have earned a Bachelor's degree in any subject from a school accredited by a member organization of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Buddhist candidates for board certification might not have earned such a Bachelor's degree. The question has arisen whether such a degree is necessary.

A traditional accredited Bachelor's program includes a liberal arts core of subjects such as world history, math, science, literature, writing, psychology/sociology, and art/music appreciation. The specific courses included may vary from school to school, but the Council for Higher Education Accreditation guidelines require a general core "designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and promote intellectual inquiry." Such a degree program prepares the graduate with skills to reason, research and write at the professional level.

Buddhist lineages that emphasize contemplation rather than academics might produce a candidate with a highly developed ability to provide a compassionate and sensitive presence. This ability in a chaplain may be deemed superior to academic cultural awareness and skills learned through a Bachelor's degree program. However, while this ability may be superior, it is not sufficient without such cultural awareness

and skills. The awareness and skills gained through earning a Bachelor's degree fill in the cultural and scientific context in which professional relationships and ministry occur.

A. Benefits of requiring a candidate to have earned a Bachelor's degree include the following:

1. Awareness: Breadth of cultural awareness gained from a typical Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science core curriculum facilitates productive relationships with non-Buddhist staff and patients. Because chaplains serve a wide variety of patients and clients, mostly non-Buddhist, ministry requires a very good working knowledge of the behavioral sciences and humanities, and a good amount of cultural humility and understanding.

2. Professionalism: Skills in logical thinking, researching and writing facilitate professional chaplaincy. Professional staff in other disciplines are required to have a Bachelor's degree or higher. Not requiring equivalent education would perpetuate a stereotype of religious anti-intellectualism.

3. Transparency: Institutions, agencies, and other professionals cannot be expected to appreciate the intricacies and nuances of the various religious traditions' training processes. By requiring the professional minimum standard of a Bachelor's degree, the APC maintains a basic level of transparency in the certification process.

4. Burden: It is an unreasonable burden to place upon the Theological Equivalency Committee and the candidate's Certification Committee to evaluate whether a candidate has gained the cultural awareness, reasoning abilities and communication skills that are equivalent to an accredited Bachelor's degree.

a. Regarding the Theological Equivalency Committee, reviewers find it challenging enough to evaluate whether an applicant's non-traditional theological education is equivalent. Asking them to also evaluate whether a non-traditional undergraduate education is equivalent places an excessive burden on volunteer committee members.

b. Regarding the face-to-face interview in the Certification Committee, Committee members are not professional educators, and thus cannot legitimately be tasked with making an educational evaluation of the candidate. Their responsibility is solely to evaluate the candidate's competencies as a professional chaplain. Further, the amount of time required for evaluating educational competencies in addition to chaplaincy competencies would place an excessive burden on the Committee process.

RECOMMENDATION #4: Continue to require an accredited Bachelor's degree from all candidates, granting an equivalency only in exceptional circumstances, such as the following:

B. Exceptional circumstances in which the Commission on Certification may grant an equivalency for an accredited Bachelor's degree include the following:

1. An accredited graduate institution has granted an equivalency, demonstrated by the candidate's supplying documentation to that effect. Please note that a candidate's having studied and trained at a highly respected Buddhist institution is not sufficient. Buddhist training institutions do not generally hold to the same entrance requirements utilized by accredited graduate institutions.

2. A candidate who participated in academic training in another country may submit their documentation to any of the credential-examination agencies that evaluate such coursework for

American universities. (Examples include: World Education Services www.wes.org and Educational Credential Evaluators www.ece.org) For an example of such a candidate, one of our BCC Buddhist Chaplains explains: "Particularly in some Asian countries, monastic training tends to equal western academic training. For example, Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist monks can obtain a Geshe degree. A Geshe degree requires 18-25 years of continuous, focused study in demonstrable academic coursework. In this rare case, the Buddhist monk can show how their educational training easily exceeds the standards of a western Bachelor's degree."

3. If credential-examination agencies refuse to review a candidate's materials due to their non-standard nature, the Theological Equivalency Committee may choose to review the materials if they clearly and simply demonstrate the candidate deserves an undergraduate equivalency. However, it will not be possible for the Committee to engage in detailed analysis and research due to the excessive burden of time that would take reviewers away from their primary responsibility of evaluating graduate theological equivalencies.

III. Meditation and Chanting: Educational Efficacy

A. Some meditation and chanting can be educational in some Buddhist training lineages. Other meditation and chanting are indistinguishable from Christian prayer and worship, which would not be accepted for credit in a graduate theological setting. Characteristics of meditation and chanting that serve an educational purpose can include some or all of the following:

1. Supervision: A teacher/mentor assigns specific requirements for practice and supports the student in attaining the goals. Commonly such mentoring occurs in a retreat setting in which the practices of meditation or chanting receive specific and intense focus. By contrast, a candidate's daily practice is not commonly closely supervised, and thus cannot easily be evaluated for an educational equivalency.

2. Educational Goals: The teacher's specific requirements include goals in the areas of learning content, gaining insight into selected subjects, or skill development:

a. The concepts of Buddhist psychology might be learned and studied through meditative practice, especially in the Zen and Tibetan traditions. Also liturgical content or sacred literature may be memorized, such as the Pure Land (*Jodo-Shin-Shu*) *nembutsu* chant. While this chant is being learned, the chanting is educational in nature. However, subsequent episodes of the *nembutsu* chant are not educational in nature when the purpose of the chant is to ensure re-birth in the Pure Land.

b. Insight around specific subjects may be the goal. For example, the student might be assigned by the mentor to reflect on how to cultivate characteristics such as universal compassion, forgiveness, equanimity, and wisdom into the true nature of existence. Rather than writing an essay on this subject, as might a student in a seminary, a Buddhist student might discuss insights with the mentor and fellow students.

c. Skill Development: For example, the practice of meditation in some lineages requires developing skills in clearing the mind, contemplating the psychological significance of inner emotions and thoughts that pass, becoming aware of meaning behind actions, reactions and events. When a student is being taught how to improve these skills, the practice is educational in nature.

3. Evaluation: The student's progress in achieving the goals is measured in some way. While in some lineages such evaluation is frowned upon as antithetical to their values, in other

lineages evaluation may be normative. For example, in some Zen lineages a student may be required to progress through a specific set of koans (thought-provoking statements and stories). In other lineages, a set number of hours in a specific practice might be required.

RECOMMENDATION #5: Require a candidate to document the above three characteristics for periods of meditation or chanting that were educational in nature. Do not accept private personal practice as educational in and of itself.

RECOMMENDATION #6: Ask the BCC Buddhist chaplains to create a compendium of the variety of educational retreats utilized for training, and provide this information to the members of the Theological Equivalency Committee.

B. A candidate's time and effort invested in the educational component of meditation and chanting might be extensive. For example, a recent candidate presented over 11,000 hours of meditation, far exceeding the 7,200 mentored education hours required for 72 credits of graduate theological studies. Therefore it is important for the Commission on Certification to be clear that meditation and chanting can contribute to, but cannot replace the content of the APC's graduate theology requirement.

The APC's graduate theology requirement encompasses nine core subject areas. Of those nine, a candidate's meditation and chanting might contribute most clearly to one or two areas, differing depending on the lineage. For example, meditation that focuses on developing skills and gaining insights might contribute most clearly to the core area of spiritual formation. Chanting that focuses on memorizing liturgy might contribute most clearly to the core area of ritual/liturgy.

RECOMMENDATION #7: Limit the amount of hours of meditation and chanting acceptable to the equivalency's 72-credit total. For example, the Commission currently accepts up to three extra units of CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) for 15 credits toward the 72-credit total. Similarly, meditation and chanting could be limited to 15 credits, which is approximately 20% of the 72-credit total, a reasonable percentage.

CONCLUSION:

It is with deep gratitude that I express my appreciation to the six BCC Buddhist chaplains who each contributed to this process to the extent of their ability at this time, some in writing and some via phone conversations: David Zuniga, Bill Bartlett, Mark Power, Carlyle Coash, Trudi Hirsch and Dhammasiri Kekanadura. It should be noted that I also obtained responses from a seventh Buddhist chaplain who has an MA in Religion and is considering applying for board certification, Talon Windwalker.

The seven responses demonstrated a great deal of consensus, with most affirming the need for the nine core graduate theological subjects, affirming the need for an undergraduate bachelor's degree, and minimizing the educational value of meditation and chanting. While these chaplains did not always agree with each other or with my recommendations, they graciously and kindly expressed their reasoning from their understanding and historical perspectives. I am grateful to announce that two of the Buddhist BCCs have agreed to join the Theological Equivalency Committee as regular reviewers and "resident subject-matter experts" for consultation when any member of the Committee is reviewing an application from a Buddhist candidate.

Sincerely,
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