

## **Buddhist Chaplaincy Speaker Series: Inspiration is the Easy Part**

### **Harrison Blum**

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#### **Vanessa Able:**

So hi. Hello everybody. Good morning. Good afternoon. Lovely to see so many people coming in to join us today. This is really nice.

So welcome to our June installment of the Buddhist Chaplaincy Speaker Series at the Sati Centre. It's our last talk for the season. This is it now. And then we're going to have a little break for the summer. And be back after the summer either in September or October. So we'll be announcing all of that on the website.

So happy to welcome Harrison Blum today. Thank you so much for joining us, Harrison. Harrison is a hospice chaplain in Western Massachusetts, and he's going to talk to us today about the of the field, the spectrum of chaplaincy.

And I love this part of the title of your talk, Harrison, when you say inspiration is the easy part. The inspiration, you know, when we connect with that will to do what we want to do, that's one thing. And then what?

And I know that, you know, at the Sati Centre, in the context of our programme, so often, you know, we might find ourselves, depending on where we're living, you know, what kind of resources are around us. Or perhaps like myself, you know, I live in France. We might live in a country where the chaplaincy options are not so obvious.

So, I love these conversations where we can talk a little bit more about how we can approach this and how we can be creative. So Harrison, thank you so much. I'm going to hand it over to you.

#### **Harrison Blum:**

Excellent. I'm excited to be here. And if you're on camera, give me a little nod if you can hear me okay. How's my sound? Everyone's nodding. Great, great.

In terms of just getting oriented with the Zoom, I will try to keep my eye on the little hands if you know how to digitally raise your hand. Feel free also to unmute and ask a question at any time. I think I'll have in the ballpark of thirty minutes of remarks, and so even if there's questions within that time, there will still be plenty of time for questions once I conclude. So ask them when you have them, please.

I can't go on without saying hi, mom and hi, dad. How are we doing? Thanks for showing up. I got my folks on the Zoom, and I'm glad to see you. We'll make Buddhist chaplains of you yet. I'm going turn

some lawyers into chaplains, and I'll be here to witness it.

So a couple introductory comments. One is that my approach is going to be talking through the trajectory of my chaplaincy roles and not necessarily diving deep into any one of them. I imagine an understanding of other people who have just maybe talked about hospice chaplaincy or just university chaplaincy. So I'll name some of the pieces. But if you have other questions about further details, let me know.

So it's kind of about movement across different realms of Buddhist chaplaincy and the motivations, the feel, why changing. I'll also mention, just to put on the table up front, that I think it was around 2017 I was at a Buddhist chaplaincy conference at Harvard Divinity School. And there was lots of skillful and interesting attention to what is a Buddhist chaplain, what kind of training is required, kind of about the formation and passion about the formation of this role.

There was not that much, or maybe any, attention on how to advocate for the expansion of the role in terms of actually having jobs to land in once we are trained and credentialed in whatever way as a Buddhist chaplain. And so I brought that question like, this is great that we're training to be wonderful Buddhist chaplains. How do we make sure there's jobs for us? And there wasn't an immediate answer, but it was recognized as an important question.

And so just to name, I think it's still an important question to be trained and then to have a place to apply and what we can offer. And to say, I've seen people have some challenges or confusions or just not knowing what the next step is. I'll just call it in both directions.

And what I mean by that is leaving an institutional job to try to become self-employed in some way. And conversely, people who find themselves already self-employed. There's some examples maybe of monastics who have been teaching and then are looking for an institutional home or to change institutional homes. And sometimes it can be hard to go from the freelance job to a salaried kind of regular-hours, regular-commitment relationships. So just to name those different challenges as we might be trying to change how we do what we do.

So I'll tell you what my path has been. And I will start growing up in Boston in a Jewish family. Can sometimes I simply call it a secular Jewish family. We participated in that tradition. I had a bar mitzvah.

And then when I got to high school, around 17, a world religion course really sparked my interest with the Buddhism chapter in Huston Smith's study of *The World's Religions*. And that was followed by some college studies, some meditation as a personal practice beginning sophomore year of college, and study abroad in Nepal. Later leading study abroad trips in Northern India, and finding Buddhist homes at first in the Shambhala centers in Philadelphia, a Goenka retreat in Kathmandu, some Tushita, Tibetan retreats, and Dharamsala.

But then since all that, and really for the last few decades, Insight Meditation has been my kind of

*dharma* home, whether it's going to retreats or doing the community *dharma* leader training through Spirit Rock. So I'm kind of an insight guy, so to speak, when I have time for it, and this is having two young kids.

And professionally, chaplaincy started for me at MIT doing a field ed there. And it was kind of like baby steps to the deep end. And I think it was a really good progression. MIT was largely leading meditation groups with college students, a book group about *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. It felt familiar enough.

And then the stretch and the next step was at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute to meet with people, usually while they were having chemotherapy. And that felt like there was more ice to break for me. I liked it. I'm a kind of chatty, outgoing person, and this was a new context.

People looked, I'll just simply say, healthy enough. They came off the street. They were wearing street clothes. Most of them, to my memory, did not need kind of like a walker or assistance to get in the door. They kind of looked at a glance not like a patient, obviously, to use that language. And yet there they were getting chemotherapy, and we see what we can do. Chatting with them and trying to form a connection of support.

And then kind of the plunge, so to speak, was doing overnights as part of that cancer chaplaincy work. Doing overnights at the affiliated and neighboring Brigham and Women's Hospital, which then led to a year of summer and then an extended residency there. And I really loved that.

Thank goodness I loved that because there's not a lot of jobs in the United States, let's say teaching high school religion, which is something I loved as a student, would have loved to do professionally, tried to find those jobs. But when I tried to find those jobs, they were usually nonexistent, or they were at a Christian or Catholic school. Or if there was the rare, maybe private progressive school that had a world religion course, they already had someone teaching it, or the history teacher was already teaching, things like that.

So I loved hospital chaplaincy. And during this time of Harvard Divinity School, also doing the two-year, five-retreat community *dharma* leader program. So there I am, age 32, graduating. I got my Master of Divinity and my Community *Dharma* Leader program. Where am I going? What does the world need, and where can I do it?

The first professional job after Divinity School was, had for four years, it was Buddhist advisor and then later a title added mindfulness program director. That was at Northeastern University in Boston. And I'll go into a little detail there just in terms of professional trajectory because after maybe two years of being a Buddhist advisor at Northeastern, I was leading a lot of mindfulness classes.

Most notably, all of the incoming nursing classes, nursing students at their Bouvé School for Nursing. They would all come through in groups of like 50 to 70 students, and I would lead these one-hour crash courses, Intro to Mindfulness. And there'd be other pockets of the university, other classes coming in for a similar training.

And so I kind of scratched my head and said, I'm doing a whole lot of mindfulness work here. I'm training students. They're leading some meditations. So even though there was no raise that came out of that, or more hours, I was given a secondary title of Mindfulness Programs Director, which I think was helpful for the next job I got, and I'll get to that in a moment.

But this Buddhist advisor in college was, I would probably call it like the sweetest Buddhist gig that I've had. Just very sweet, very nurturing, very hands-on. Over those four years, the students grew from six to eight people a week up to 30 plus.

Toward the end, I had experienced students giving mini *dharma* talks and examples from their lives about different Buddhist tenets and supporting younger students. We went out to Copley Square and did a public meditation to raise awareness for climate change. And it felt lovely.

And it was, I think it started at ten or twelve hours a week and then got up to fifteen hours a week. So it's really not going to put a roof over my head. I tried going back to work with my dad for a few months and then he told me it was time to move out. So I had to just ribbing my dad there. I had to be able to pay rent, right? You're right, dad. I'm in it not just to have fun as a Buddhist, but we want to, at least I want to, be gainfully employed.

So thankfully I found another job three days a week. This was at Franciscan Children's. We're talking, at least I am talking, about how to support ourselves. So I will mention healthcare was included in that three-day-a-week job.

And that was mainly, that was on their adolescent psychiatric units. These were acute units, mostly teenagers coming from the hospital from the emergency room after suicidal attempts or suicidal ideation. And that was incredibly satisfying in some ways. And also there was kind of a lot of time of building rapport in between actually having what I might call more of an explicitly spiritual or supportive or emotional-oriented conversation.

One of these focused, high-impact aspects of that work was leading mindfulness groups the three days that I was there each week, and then getting to do some research on that. The research was, we showed through those groups that mindfulness did lower anxiety from pre- to post-group, regardless of sex, age, or previous experience with meditation, which was exciting. I wish I could have gotten a control group. There wasn't the support on the unit for that.

So these two jobs, it felt lovely. I was in my early to mid thirties. I never went to the same job two days in a row. And then after four days, wanting something full time, a more sustainable kind of adult, going toward having a family salary, then I put my hat in the ring.

And I like to mention what I did not get hired as because they're just examples. Also, if I had gotten hired, I would have had a really different professional life. I had a phone interview but did not get hired to be the palliative chaplain at Mass General Hospital.

I had a phone interview but did not get hired to be the religious advisor of what is called *The Conversation Project*. They're a group that helps individuals, organizations, and congregations have end-of-life conversations.

But what I did get hired as was director of religious and spiritual life at Emerson College. That's about 4,000 students and three part-time chaplains. When I worked there, they had a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Jewish chaplain that were, I think, two to three days a week each. And I was the full-time chaplain and director.

And then after two years there, getting the same title, the same job, but two hours west in Western Massachusetts at Amherst College. Amherst College is about half the students, but double the staff. So with a little less than 2,000 students, I was supervising seven or so part-time chaplains of different faiths. And I was at Amherst College for seven years.

So I want to kind of talk a little bit about what was that work. What did I enjoy? Why did I leave it? Some of the high points of, and these are not exclusively about, but some of this will be about being a director of a college center rather than a staff chaplain of a college center at different campuses.

Some of those high points were creating and leading interfaith retreats, overnight retreats, campouts with tents and an interfaith conversation at the campus farm, dinner conversation groups, leading a meditation group at a Boston shelter with students as participants as co-leaders, film students with permission filming this group with students and formerly homeless folks meditating together and reflecting together.

And then also as a director, right after October 7, I was at the bar where sometimes you are on a Saturday night, it's like eleven p.m., and I get the text from the dean of students like, we need to respond tomorrow morning. And I'm like, my phone's blowing up with the attack.

And so, you know, first thing, whatever it was, seven a.m. on a Sunday morning, drafting an email that I'm still proud of to this day with Angie Tissi-Gassoway, the dean of students at Amherst College. An email that recognized harm and also was trying to be supportive without being divisive. And kind of large-scale messaging and support like that was part of that college work.

So still, as I compare it to the Northeastern University, just like that Buddhist chaplain focused job versus the larger director, middle-management supervisory role. As director, still creating and running spiritual or interfaith programs, but less, and increasingly not during weekday hours. Still offering juicy one-on-one spiritual counseling with students, but less so. And more administrative supervisory work.

So that was really satisfying to find my niche or my kind of find the itch and scratch it, to support and listen to a professional chaplain. Some of them were younger than me. A lot of them were older than me. That was just kind of rich and interesting, helping them see their work and their value and their struggles with students.

But that's also not me in front of a person offering this direct spiritual care to their own personal path, their own personal need. I'll share a few reflections that I offered maybe about a year ago. Spoke, as I have done for a few years, in a Harvard Divinity School class, and it's a class on chaplaincy in higher education.

And I shared two observations, both of which I don't personally love so much about the work, as long as I'm being honest here. And the kind of e-phrases or the little handles were titrate down and titrate up. And I wonder if folks working in colleges or outside on the Zoom feel like they're drawn or asked or needing to work in a similar way.

What I mean by that, so titrate down. Titrate offerings down. Make them smaller, more bite-sized. Students attending, let's say, a one-hour discussion where a chaplain provides pizza maybe used to be low-hanging fruit, easy to get students in the room.

Increasingly, at least at a really high-functioning, high-demand school of rigor like Amherst College, it's not really happening. I don't think it was happening as much. A rich topic and free food wasn't always enough to get a group there.

So smaller offerings like tabling around campus with a little wheel that you spin and there's one kind of probing or meaning-making question wherever the wheel lands and you have a moment of connection. Passive installations where students can respond to a prompt and maybe put up a word and then it's a visual display.

We had carved stones with one kind of power or inspiration word on them. We would leave them on this table outside of our office, and they would get taken every week or two. I'd have to refill the stones. Never saw those people. I don't know what the stone meant to them, but it was a passive offering. And there's other examples of these.

So I think they make sense. I think it's good marketing in a way. It's good outreach. But I didn't find it especially satisfying to me.

And we actually had someone come in, I forget the name of the app, but there's a spiritual support app geared toward young adults or college students. And that person, framing their approach, was kind of making just this point that you kind of have to aim for the five-minute engagement before you can get the one-hour engagement. And that started to feel less satisfying for me.

And then the opposite, titrate up. Ask for more time, like an overnight retreat, a service trip. Sometimes students will feel that they can and want to give twenty-four or forty-eight hours to something that's categorically different than that one-hour option when there's a dozen options on a Thursday night on campus.

And this became more of a stretch and sometimes not possible as I became a parent myself. It became less novel. I still love doing it. But after supporting two overnight retreats and creating two at Emerson

College, what became my edge and what became more fulfilling for me professionally was to change the audience.

And I'll mention that in a few minutes, but to lead different kinds of retreats with adults outside of my day job, stretching me to serve new audiences, offering new skills, and frankly getting a bigger boost of payment for it. Like stretching myself to take away family time on a weekend for no additional compensation was a stretch of values. There was tension there.

So titrate down, titrate up started to feel like a stretch. And I put an email out to the listserv of the Association for Chaplaincy and Spiritual Life in Higher Education, the kind of professional group of college chaplains. I'm not sure if I was asking a question, but I was just kind of expressing and venting, maybe looking for validation about how people in a career of chaplaincy, in this case college chaplaincy, how do they maintain work-life balance?

How can you stay in this role from your mid to late twenties through your thirties into your forties when there's shifting family needs and many other variables that might make us differently or less available? I did get validation of that. I didn't get any key answers.

At this point, just before I shift and kind of paint a little bit of a picture of what kind of, I can call it, Buddhist ministry work I was doing in current and outside of these day jobs, any thoughts or questions on what I've already mentioned before I kind of fill in the outside-of-work pieces?

Okay. Okay, so I'll tell you what I was doing kind of outside my day job because I think it's part of the picture. And I'll kind of speak to the end about what, as I've already said, what my itches were and how I scratched them.

Maybe I'm still in a place of wondering, where is my motivation coming from, and why do extra work outside of a day job? And there's been some ways, I'll get to it, where I've maybe brought in more of the creative or more of the pursuits that maybe frankly I was surprised that my job kind of let me do it, but we'll get there.

So sacred dance. Dance has been something really joyful, a spiritual practice as well for me for a few decades. And I've created three different monthly or bimonthly dance events that went for between one year or five or so years since 2006.

So creating and holding space with intention, opening circles, framing movement as a contemplative practice. One of those three events was an explicitly Buddhist event that had some guided meditation and Buddhist framing to it.

And then writing about that, putting out a call for an anthology, getting a book contract to write about movement and dance as a Buddhist practice in the West, and then pulling in these 26 other contributors and editing all their chapters. And at one point, if I remember correctly, I had 1,700 emails between myself and the contributors.

So this huge project, of course, like before I had kids, this huge project on nights and weekends, kind of a labor of love. I think I was talking about that once and I joked that what did I say? If you work hard enough at something you love, like someone will not pay you a lot of money for it or something like that. Like if you love it enough, you can accomplish something you're very proud of and pay for it.

But I love that I did that. That was really satisfying. And then kind of guest speaking or introductory sessions at different colleges and conferences and companies here and there. But a few dozen over maybe a ten-year period.

And I'll just kind of, I don't think I ever pulled back at this point and said to myself, like, should I leave my day job? Like, do I have enough going on here to run dance events and publish another book? What would it be? Or to kind of be a freelance speaker?

It just seemed kind of obvious to me that that would not pay the bills. And my name or my branding, my interest in branding myself as some kind of coach or speaker, didn't feel compelling or something I was really entertaining.

But I will also say that as much as I created and facilitated successful dance events, I thought about people who maybe do it at larger centers, Omega, Esalen, Kripalu, and didn't feel like I was of that caliber. Nor did I really want to focus and stretch in that way.

I just mention that because I think it's useful to know what our capacity is, know what our skill set is, and not feel like we have to kind of keep going to have a bigger audience or a more prestigious venue. I felt good in my little Boston kind of dance-building scene with that.

A few other things going on more recently in the background, a breathwork training a few years ago that I loved, a hugely impactful practice. I think complementary to embodied meditation, but generally with a much faster and stronger cathartic impact after even thirty minutes of practice.

I've led these retreats with healthcare professionals, and usually eighty percent of the people are sobbing hysterically on the floor, having this beautiful catharsis. And that just doesn't happen with seated guided meditation, at least in my experience. So breathwork is a powerful immediate practice.

And a spiritual life coach training. It was a coaching training, life coaching with a focus on spiritual life coaching. And I'll say more about coaching soon. That was to help my college work. I was still working as a college chaplain then, but then wondering and learning what are these other ways of engaging. And I'll speak of the difference between coaching and chaplaincy and *dharma* teaching soon.

Just one more piece is Seasonal Sabbatical. Seasonal Sabbatical is the name of those healthcare worker retreats. We just led our sixth one. I have to give credit to my friend who's a doctor who convened these. It was his vision when he pulled me in for breathwork and mindfulness teaching and some coaching during free time. And there's also a yoga teacher.

So three of us have led these six weekend retreats. And I can say more about that, but it's beautiful.

It has led to us being invited to lead the wellness track of a fall New York conference for addiction medicine practitioners.

So we're going from maybe eight to ten people to 50 people. And I might go from bringing home \$500 to bringing home \$2,200 plus expenses and a hotel room. So it's like a nice kind of venue exposure upgrade. It feels exciting.

It doesn't feel so much like this is where my new career is, but I'm pleased and flattered. It's like, again, kind of a labor of love. It's an exploration.

So to find that something we're exploring, bringing what could certainly be called spiritual practices, also called wellness practices, bringing that to a burned-out field of healthcare practitioners, and having a response from a different and larger audience that like, yes, that is needed, we want you to build that into our conference, is satisfying.

I'm just kind of pausing to see how much of what I will share about the advice I got. I'm just going to kind of streamline this. I was at a point where I was thinking of leaving the university work and wanted to hear from people about what does it look like to be self-employed? Or like, I've done a coaching training. What does it mean to be a self-employed coach?

I've done a breathwork training. Some people pay the bills with breathwork. I've taught a lot of mindfulness, especially in secular settings, especially to beginners. Is that something that I can, like, hang my hat on, so to speak?

And in these different conversations with coaches, with ministers, with small business creators, one person is a professor of a spiritual leadership class, you won't be surprised that I got conflicting advice. It's like when I was trying to publish that anthology about Buddhism and dance, I got a response from one publisher that it was too academic. Another publisher said it was not academic enough. A third publisher said it was too much about dance. Another publisher said it was too much about Buddhism. And we know that praise and blame are going to fly around.

So one person brought something to me, is that there exist small business development centers. I never would have known about that. And so I connected with my local one. They had online modules teaching about the difference between an LLC or a, my dad will know all of this better than I do, but different kind of financial modalities, different financial structures.

And I had one person say, you really need to be an LLC. It's really essential to protect yourself. And then another family member, cousin who's a lawyer in this area said, it's really overkill. With a small size that I'm starting, even trademarking the name, that can come later, assuming I can show that I've been using it for a while.

I got the advice to build on what lights me up as a form of resistance in my heart. That was a sweet piece. One person suggested focusing on rites of passage. That's not really where my hunger is, but

it makes sense to me that someone could get clients with rites of passage outside of or parallel to religious ones.

The suggestion to be a wedding officiant. I've officiated enough weddings for friends to know how much work that takes, like hours and hours of interviews and travel, and I wasn't looking to bite that off.

What else? You'll get jobs from people you know. Websites as a place to just kind of find needed forms for your clients, but not the way that you will get your clients. Rather, word of mouth and blog posts, offering things for free, like some kind of support group for burned-out public school teachers that maybe then you have a series of sessions you can offer if they want to continue working with you.

One person said that sometimes what we thought would be a ministry is actually just a job. And it would be a stretch for me to say that about my higher-ed directing work, but there was enough of a flavor of that, that my going to Divinity School to be a spiritual person supporting people spiritually, at least in those simple terms, was not really being fulfilled. It was feeling like just a job, a good job, but not what I wanted to do with my time as much.

Some people said you need to be credentialed by the International Coaching Federation. That's really important. And some people had not even heard of that.

And then there was a thread of, I guess I'll mention someone else, suggested I get in touch with Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile. They created the Sacred Design Lab, and I participated in one of their cohorts and some of their trainings or modules and such.

But this is my understanding of them, is that it's a grant-funded, outward-facing, kind of, I think, large workshop incubator, multifaceted, just like much of a bigger animal than I wanted to create and ride on, so to speak. So I wasn't interested in creating some kind of big nonprofit with coworkers and institutional funding and a board of trustees and such, or board of advisors.

And then just lastly, there were sometimes, this like six or eight people that I spoke with, sometimes they had really promising referrals for me. One of them was a wilderness-based leadership training for high-functioning and I think I mentioned high-paying executives, bringing things like mindfulness out to the woods for CEOs.

And it looked exciting, but that person never called me back. Several people didn't. And I just didn't feel like I wanted to be the person that left two or three messages for a contact's contact.

So I'll talk a little bit about what I'll call the leap into hospice. I've been in hospice work for the last year. And I'll reflect on what I've done in jobs and outside of jobs, and then I'll end comparing chaplaincy and coaching and *dharma* teaching. Let's do that.

So after maybe it was fifteen years or so of chaplaincy work, what seemed like the safety school of chaplaincy, and if it sounds like I'm putting down hospice, I more mean to be honest with my own

kind of limited thinking at the time when I was beginning my career. But I thought, or I feared maybe, that hospice chaplaincy, at least in my context in the United States, has less *CPE* requirements.

These formal modules of chaplaincy training, so often less in my experience, or what I heard, were there were not the requirements to be board certified. I was board certified for eight years or so, and I took that seriously as a meaningful credential to get. So hospice chaplaincy not requiring it gave me some pause.

And also I had hesitation around what I thought could be narrow and possibly repetitive work to have kind of one context of supporting dying people and their families. So some of that turned me away when I was 32. But then at whatever it was, 45, I thought, oh my gosh, I could do this?

I could just drop all the emails. I could drop the five to seven meetings a day and spend most of my work time with people, hearing about them, offering support. Amazing.

And it has been amazing. I've done it for about a year, and it's been, at the time of my career, a great shift. Somewhat less hours, much more flexible hours, no nights or weekends. And a big relief from this cognitive fatigue of managing dozens and dozens of Google Docs and varying scope and timelines of projects.

And I think it also has worked for me because I've exercised the muscle of creating and completing big projects and events. That's not what I'm hungry for, at least as required by my day job right now.

And I have had time. There's been fluctuations, but I've had time to develop a coaching business on the side, which is an offering of breathwork, of mindfulness instruction, of illness and death support, and of coaching with or without a spiritual angle to it.

I've had a few coaching clients. I started one a few weeks ago. I've taught a class at a local university, an intro to mindfulness class. And I have a few proposals out.

One is to a summer dance program, and the other is to my local Insight Meditation group, proposals for a combined breathwork and movement and dance and prayer kind of half-day workshop that I'm calling Breathe, Dance, Pray. So I hope to do those.

And so I'm really happy in my hospice chaplain job. It is some of the deepest and most sacred and humbling work that I've done. And I'm really satisfied and patient with my slow but emerging life coaching or facilitation business. It feels new for me to call it a business, but there it is.

I was at a Rainbow Gathering maybe twenty years ago, an outdoor kind of communal camping festival. And my friend and I, there was a path and there was a puddle so that if you walked the path, you would be walking through the water.

So we found a bunch of sticks nearby and tried to lay the sticks parallel to each other and next to each other so that hopefully you could like walk on sticks as they bridged the puddle. But they were too small and it wasn't really working.

And someone walked by and just took one look at us and said, don't just use what you find, look for what you need. And his point was like, you need to walk a little farther into the woods to get bigger sticks so that you can walk on them and not get your feet wet.

And I thought of that phrase from time to time, to not just use what you find, look for what you need. And I think there's been a flavor of that in my working in and outside of formal jobs or institutionally offered jobs.

I'm thrilled to have had a salary doing some of this Buddhist chaplaincy work. And I've been able to bring kind of experimental technology to support a dance event where students are kind of moving and there's a whole visual field of atoms behind them and they're kind of moving and seeing what the actual true-to-science atomic response would be. And it's a little hard to describe.

I can put a link in the chat about that right now. You know, this is an example of like a movement and dance kind of far-out, somewhat psychedelic, very much on the edge of like science and technology thing that I only had access to because a college friend of mine invented it.

But something that I would think of as what I have to do outside of work, but Northeastern supported me working with that as an event on campus. So there's been great benefits to working with the institutional resources and buy-in.

And then something like offering a regular Buddhist-framed dance event, I don't think any college is going to ask me to do that. I've led those once at different colleges I've worked at, but it has never been a big draw. So I really had to put that outside of my college work in the local kind of urban dance community that is around Boston and Western Mass.

I think I'll just go to the ending now with, in a brief way, comparing these three fields. So I'll frame chaplaincy as helping to be with, and coaching as helping to reach, and *dharma* teaching as helping to see or remember.

So chaplaincy, helping to be with, witnessing and supporting more than changing. In my experience, often interfaith. I know it's not always the case in different countries. But working interfaith, usually not working with Buddhist people, often Catholic and Protestant folks in this Northeast U.S. context. Sourcing patients and clients with their own sources of truth, meaning, and strength, and located within institutions.

Coaching on framing is helping to reach. Outcome-focused, stress on action and accountability, explicit goals identified and checked in on, and not necessarily spiritual or Buddhist. And in my experience or in my approach, it can accommodate a greater degree of questioning.

And that has been, that is my coaching training, to ask three or four times about the same thing, really to keep asking and to get underneath, to help a person understand what's kind of underneath the issue they're initially presenting. And I think it's true that I wouldn't ask so many questions in a chaplaincy visit, I think, at least from the same angle perhaps.

And coaching, for me so far, located outside of institutions. There are companies that sell coaching packages and coaching providers to other companies. That's not something I'm approaching at this point.

I think that for those who do that, it can give you more security with getting clients. But you do, my understanding is it does help and often is needed to have at least the lowest International Coaching Federation credentials. So you might need to put that time in. And then you'll get paid less per hour than if you were a private coach.

And then *dharma* teaching, helping to see and remember, drawing. And we know this, drawing from Buddhist teachings often assumes a shared worldview, like not-self or thoughts as not intrinsically valuable or true. Can include an element of telling people how things are.

It would be in my holding of it on kind of the edge of chaplaincy or on the edge of coaching to tell people how things are rather than trying to look at how things are next to them and see it together with their point of view guiding. And then *dharma* teaching, still trying to understand that.

I think I imagine we each would have our own answer, or some of you have much better clarity on this, but perhaps it's a mixture of institutional employment or affiliation versus independent practitioner. And just to close with a vignette, last week I think it was, I was with a patient I'd seen maybe half a dozen times.

A hospice patient, and I left. She seemed close to passing. I was informed that she died an hour later.

And that afternoon I was on this kind of big circular saucer swing, like a three-foot-diameter swing, and my four-year-old was swinging with me. He's been bringing up death more, and we've been talking about it more.

And we've used the language of spirits, like well, when you die, you become a spirit and spirits can go anywhere. And he's asked, like at least once a week for several weeks now, are you sure spirits don't die? Why don't spirits die? Or when are our bodies going to die? Will we always be together as spirits? Can we live in our same house as spirits? Do spirits have bodies?

And so as he's brought more language and attention to this, for the first time last week, I told him not just that my job, my new job, is to drive around and help sick people. But I told him, actually, my job is to help dying people.

And I was with someone today and I was with her just before she died and then she died and she's okay now. Her spirit is moving around. So I'm ending on a personal note, but I am feeling like this is incredibly sweet to be able to be with that woman and sing to her an hour before she dies, and then to hold my son and to kind of feel his vulnerability.

And to be home to feel that, to be home at 04:30 or whatever it was instead of six because I'm finishing up more of a crunch job that asks a different and maybe more of me. So I just gave you what I wanted to share. That's the end of my prepared flow.

And I'd love to take questions. Thanks for hearing it. I hope that parts of it were kind of at least bringing up a question for many of you. And I'd love to hear what feels interesting or what questions you have. Oh, yeah. Merrick, please.

**Questioner:**

I just wanna thank you, Harrison. What you said resonated a 100%. I'm about maybe twenty years older than you, but I have the degree in theology. I have I spent years teaching world religions and other courses at Catholic high schools.

I've been wanting to do chaplaincy for a long time. What brought me to that was thinking about being a spiritual director and then deciding that I didn't want to keep talking about a male god. And so I started learning about teaching mindfulness, and that started my Buddhist trajectory.

I also trained as a coach. I'm an ICF-certified coach. I struggle with entrepreneur versus institutional kind of balance. So all the things you said just completely resonate.

I didn't have the experience that you had at a university. But right now, I'm in chaplaincy training for CPE hours. I'm at a hospital where in the Bay Area a lot of the patients are Catholic.

And I had moved away from my Catholic upbringing and all of that and my training and moved more into Buddhism. But here I was bringing in Catholic stuff, and it moved me. And it made me kind of cry when I did it as I connected to these patients.

But also the Buddhist part is, I mean, I'd much rather read *Tricycle* magazine than read presents from, you know, spiritual direction tradition kind of. So I just, you know, and I'm having to choose between being a chaplain. If I get certified, I can't, you know, do I say I'm Catholic? Do I say I'm Buddhist?

I don't see as many patients that are Buddhist even in the Bay Area. And when I have, they're not quote American, you know, kind of American Buddhist. It's more like someone from Sri Lanka that has a tradition that I know nothing about and I'm learning from them.

And I think it's better. I think like what you're talking about in terms of being a chaplain to healthcare workers and bringing mindfulness to them and helping them to kind of slow down and get in touch with their feelings and saying it's okay to do that is extremely helpful.

I mean, when you talked about that, I just got all fired up inside. And again, I'm struggling with, you know, what's institutional to do versus what is entrepreneur and how to mesh that or how to combine that and make that work. And it sounds like you're finding a balance, and I'm looking to find my balance too. So I just wanted to say, I appreciate what you're saying. I am searching. I'm trying to sort out where to go with all of this, and thank you for what you offered. And if

**Vanessa Able:**

Do you have anything, if he comes up to speak to what he said, great. If not, it's okay.

**Harrison Blum:**

I'm just so pleased that part of me is looking at what I'm going to say. I'm like, it's just me, like who wants to hear this? Who else is going through anything related? So I'm pleased, and I feel more in a peer group.

So thank you, I feel connected to you and your share. And also, I don't know if this is an active question for you, but if you're wondering who to, what is the language, like what religious body to credential you or to have that letter in terms of being board certified as a chaplain, I don't know if it would really matter.

It would matter if you apply to be a chaplain at a college where the job description is like Catholic chaplain or Buddhist chaplain. But it might be good enough just to go with whatever institution you would most easily get that letter from and maintain every five years, if that's still the case, that letter of good standing.

Because once you, if you're in at least the hospital work that I'm used to, you're not, they're just not gonna know. Or if they say, oh, have a letter from a Catholic group or from a Buddhist group, then you can in that interview or in that patient room or in any context be and speak to how you blend them.

And if you haven't seen it already, the book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* by Paul Knitter. You have that. Yeah. Great.

**Questioner:**

Oh, thank you so much.

**Harrison Blum:**

You're welcome. Yeah, feel free to anyone as well. Feel free to reach out if there's some more detail over email. I'm happy to be in touch. Other thoughts or what resonates or what doesn't? Oh, you didn't touch on this, but this is what's aligned for me. And Chris, please. Yeah. Sure.

**Questioner:**

Hi. Thanks. Sorry for being off camera. It's too early to get myself together. I was curious, I was curious how your Buddhist background shows up in the current position you're in.

I'm like specifically curious whether it's ever felt like a limitation. Like, I don't know, have you ever approached somebody seeking chaplaincy service and then like, I don't know, upon discovering that you're from a different religious background or something, the interest goes down? Or maybe even more formally, in searching for a job was the fact that your qualification was specifically Buddhist, say, was that ever disadvantaging or yeah.

**Harrison Blum:**

Yeah, great question. I'm just one person, but I don't. And I'm thinking of two jobs, but I don't think it, I think the Buddhist aspect was an advantage. I speculate that it was an advantage.

I think Emerson College being like art and journalism focused, I think they enjoyed having a Buddhist and someone who could teach mindfulness on their staff. And I think something somewhat similar maybe could be said about Amherst College.

I was the first, and Amherst has a longer line of these directors of religious and spiritual life positions, but I was the first Buddhist to be there in those places to have that role. I'm not tracking it too closely, but there's not a lot of Buddhists doing that. So I think there's room for more.

Years ago, I had a colleague, a Buddhist, in one of the *CPE* trainings I was doing. He was a staff chaplain. I was a *CPE* student. And he was Buddhist, and he would tell people that he was Buddhist when he met them. That's my memory. Like he said, I like them to know what they're getting.

And I found myself doing the opposite, or at least I would not tell them I was Buddhist. And I still don't self-identify as Buddhist unless I feel really like they're assuming that I'm Christian and that I'm feeding into that. Or there would be a really big break of trust if they were to later find out that I'm not Christian.

I'm assumed to be Christian all the time, I'm pretty sure. But yeah, so this other chaplain likes to tell people what they're getting before they get it. And I made the point, like, I like to give people what they're getting before I tell them what they're getting.

And I think, you know, I've worked with, somewhat recently, a Catholic chaplain. And when I spoke with him about supporting Catholic patients, he and I observed him in some shared visits, he would create these kind of maybe mini liturgies.

He would offer, he would, like, read a psalm and maybe pause and play a hymn. And then he would offer some extemporaneous prayer and then maybe say the Our Father. And talking about that and asking him how I might show up, I realized that I don't think I want to show up like as good of a Catholic version of my offerings as I can.

I think I want to, and I think I do support Catholic and Protestant patients. But I think there's something that I bring that's different and of benefit and really positively responded to precisely because I'm not, and this is not to kind of degrade any Catholic chaplain, but I must not be.

I don't think I am bringing the most traditional and signaled Catholic type of prayer or offerings. I think my, for example, with Catholic patients, I think my prayer is much more maybe in the evangelical or Pentecostal side. I tend to bring a lot of heartfulness and slowness and pause and emotion at times into prayer.

And for a lot of people of Protestant or Catholic background, especially maybe age 65 and older, there's a chunk of them who have just never had prayer like that. For them, prayer just means *Hail Mary* or

*Our Father*. And so I'm bringing my own sensibility, including a Buddhist sensibility of cultivated kind of compassion and body presence. So I think it's an asset and not a liability. You're not framing it as a liability potentially, but I'll use that language.

**Questioner:**

Yeah. Wonderful. That's so helpful. Great. Yeah. And thank you generally for all the specificity of your anecdotes. It was so helpful.

**Harrison Blum:**

Oh, great. Great. You're welcome. And I just because I think it's unfortunately, I want to recommend a chapter I wrote, but it's in a book. It's kind of expensive, I think. But I'll just say that you can email me if you want info on this.

But I've done, not unlike others, have spent years and read books and done some kind of version of deep work, like reading books like *God Is a Verb* or *The Radical Path of Nondual Judaism*, and other forms of deconstructing what God is to understand like what is this.

As it's famously been said, from one person to another, I forget the context, like, tell me about this God that you say you don't believe in. And I'm bringing this up because I've put in the work and found the authenticity. So I don't feel like I'm faking it when I'm praying with someone to a god, even if their god is pretty different than my openness to god.

**Questioner:**

Yeah, totally. Thank you.

**Harrison Blum:**

You're welcome. What else? Who's got that question that they are halfway leaning in to ask?

**Vanessa Able:**

Well, I have one, if you don't mind. So thank you so much, first of all, for really sharing from this wide experience that you've had in all sorts of different situations.

I love how openly you talk about the necessity of carving out a livelihood for yourself, you know, through this work. You know, you talk very directly about this. And not just that, but also the balance, you know, the work-life balance.

And now that you have young children, you know, what that looks like. And, you know, needing to not just be home a decent amount of hours, but also I think the way that you take care of your energy, you know, and what you have to bring home to your children at the end of the day.

So I guess I was thinking, you know, I was telling you a little earlier, you know, I live in a country, I live in France, where professional chaplaincy is not really developed at all, where chaplains work in a volunteer manner.

And it seems to me as established as it is in the U.S., there are still moments where I feel there's a kind of fragility, you know, in that. You know, if a workplace was undergoing huge budget cuts, you know, my worry would always be that the spiritual care department might be the first on the chopping block or one of the first.

So what part has it played for you, I mean, that, or assuming that that has been your experience, to advocate for the importance of chaplaincy? You know, do you feel that that sort of part of your work as a chaplain or part of your work as a person, you know, working in a spiritual directorship role or something like this within an institution, that you're, you know, in some ways kind of representing the field as well?

So I just wonder if you could talk to that a little bit.

**Harrison Blum:**

Sure. And you're right.

I mean, Dana-Farber built a whole new building for their cancer center with a beautiful new chapel and then laid off their, I think all but one of their chaplaincy staff. And Mass General in Boston, I think, recently stopped their *CPE* program. Or I might be not quite correct, but their lead was downsizing. So yes.

I think my short answer is that I don't. I think it's been just enough for me as one person to try to get the job and do the job. And that I am happy to work on this larger project, but I think it's more the space of like Harvard Divinity School with their Buddhist Ministry Initiative, who's hosting Buddhist ministry conferences.

However they want to frame it, as a course or as an independent study or as an initiative. But I think it's more the collective, especially the resource collective. Or the, as I mentioned, the Association for Chaplaincy and Spiritual Life in Higher Education.

When I was on their board, we did some work to look at credentials and try to take the healthcare credentials and other excessive credentials and create a version for college chaplains. And why do that? Well, to kind of be a professional group and not just to be people who like spirituality and talking about it.

And of course, college chaplains are much more than that. But I think we live in an increasingly kind of credentialed and reliant relation rather than kind of student-teacher kind of way. Students, as they, to a degree, should be considered, they're consumers of a college degree.

And so being able to, in explicit terms, reflect the professional capacity and in quantitative research terms, being able to show the impact. I have a little bit of just a research geek in me that was excited to do research on mindfulness. But part of that adolescent psych unit research that was published in the *Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy* was about showing that, and I think it's somewhere, it's been years

since I read it, but I think somewhere in my introduction, I maybe said something about how nurses and social workers and clinicians are mentioned, or mentioned in one particular study as providers of mindfulness, but chaplains, at least in one place or maybe many places, are not.

And so wanting to say, we also provide this benefit, and here's the science behind it. So if I leave it at that, Vanessa, can I take Cindy's question and then we'll have this moment of like, do we continue as a larger or a smaller group? How does that sound?

**Vanessa Able:**

Exactly. Yes. So let's take one more question from Cindy. And then what we'll do is we'll bring the event to a close, and then there'll be a little more time just with the Sati chaplaincy students and any past students who'd like to hang on as well.

**Harrison Blum:**

Great. Okay. Cindy, please.

**Questioner:**

Yeah. I wondered if you have any recommendations for someone like me. I'm 72. I have a master's in transpersonal psychology. I have a life coaching certificate, but I'm not, you know, certified. And I have the Buddhist Eco-Chaplaincy through Sati's, you know, center.

And at my age, I'm sort of semi-retired, and I've done a lot of retreat work. So I've been retreat coordinator at a Buddhist meditation center for three and a half years and then at a Quaker center.

So I'm obviously in that environment and a meditator, attended a lot of retreats. But I have not found a way at this stage of my life to be of service in any of those fields.

So I'm looking for your suggestions, and I would only want to work, you know, ten, fifteen hours a week. But I'm looking for your suggestions, having been broadly in all of these fields, of how I could get a foot in the door and, you know, either start by volunteering or get some sort of paid income. Does anything come to mind as I'm talking? Yeah.

**Harrison Blum:**

And the doors that you would like to get a foot in include coaching and faculty, or what is?

**Questioner:**

Yeah. A crossover of both. And I'm just, I just got back from a year in Latin America traveling and doing volunteer work. So I'm really looking to sort of reassess where my passion is and what lights me up and where my skill set is.

So that is a little bit undefined. But yes, something to do with life coaching or Buddhist Eco-Chaplaincy considering my background, psychology, chaplain, and life coaching.

**Harrison Blum:**

Yeah. I might, I mean, the piece of advice someone else gave me that I kind of referenced earlier was something like do what lights you up. Build on what lights you up.

So I hear you talking, and I'm wondering, like, what would a half-day, one-day, three-day program be? And maybe there's not a lot of difference you'd have to implement if it was for college students versus local teachers versus any other kind of groups.

I guess my answer is reflect on what you can offer and what you want to offer and create something. Why not just start super specific? And do create a flow of offerings, whether it's like six sessions with one person or six hours with 30 people.

And then see if you can speak with the gatekeepers, like the local directors of religious and spiritual life or the kind of head of a social work unit or, and definitely, if you need to, like you're saying, offer it maybe with no cost. And then once you've done it for a couple different groups, put a price on it.

But you're kind of framing a pretty big realm of possibility. So I guess my advice within that openness is to get clear on what you most want to offer. Don't worry too much about making the perfect offering.

Once you do offer something, then use the language they need to hear. Like, for a college, it could be about like student overcommitment and screen fatigue and attention fatigue and different things. It'll be language to sell it to different groups that you'd have to learn, maybe.

**Questioner:**

Yeah, think I'm yeah, I am just trying to figure it out myself. But I know I like working in wilderness and outdoors and all that. So that's one area rather than a building or an institution. I thought about first volunteering with hospice, but it's a lot of indoors institutions. Or yeah. Well, I guess it's at home too.

**Harrison Blum:**

So then maybe you offer your thing. And this is, I don't know what your thing is, but just to spitball. Your thing could be like you take walks.

You offer one hour to ninety-minute walks with loved ones who are supporting someone who's dying. And you are like the nature-walk grief supporter.

**Questioner:**

Yeah. I guess I need to experiment more and try out a couple of volunteer jobs or attend groups and then start to formulate how I could, I guess, be an independent, brand myself sort of thing rather than being hired by a company or a group or anything to work part time. You know? I'm trying to work my way in the door of something, but I'm also trying to experiment with what works. I'm looking for,

yeah, it is very broad, but it's like what in my area in Sonoma County I can plug into to get going on some more ideas.

**Harrison Blum:**

I think just in closing, I'll just say just yes, yes to figuring it out. Like if you spend the time and try and volunteer, offer, I'm confident you'll, I'm excited for you, I'm confident you'll find where you need to go.

**Questioner:**

Okay, thank you.

**Vanessa Able:**

Well, thank you. Thank you so much, Harrison, for joining us today, and thank you for just sharing so candidly about your experience.

You know, it really, it's such a window into the reality of what chaplaincy, Buddhist chaplaincy work in particular, looks like and bringing that into balance with the rest of your life. So, yeah. Thank you. It's given me a lot to think about.

And thank you everybody. Like I mentioned, it's the last talk of the season. We'll be back after the summer with more talks, more speakers, more chance to connect with this community of Buddhist chaplains.

So thank you so much. And well, I wish you all a good summer and invite the current students and any alums from any of the chaplaincy programs to just stay on a little longer with Harrison. Okay. Thank you.