

Chaplaincy Conference
Building a Bridge Through Spiritual Friendships
Balliol College, Oxford University March 15 &16 2014

Hosted by the Oxford Buddha Vihara and organised by Keith Munnings, the conference enabled senior chaplains from the US to join with UK chaplains and academics in sharing dialogue about their work. The Buddhist Chaplains, trainers and academics worked mainly in higher education and healthcare.

Holly Haynes from Upaya, Harrison Blum of NorthEastern University and Richard Torres from Community College shared their experience in the US while Keith Munnings, Sarah Shaw, Roger Green and Caroline Brazier shared the UK experience. What quickly became apparent was the US emphasis on professionalism and the UK honouring of the enthusiastic and skilled amateur. In the US training systems are regularised and extensive leading eventually to recognised qualifications.

All their experiences with people where they worked were very moving and demonstrated the value of Buddhist practice whether it was a support to the practitioner or practices actually offered to some of the people in need. Along with chaplains from other faiths – Andrew Todd, Andrew Willson and Shaunaka - this led to more discussions of the roles of chaplains and what is expected of them by universities, hospitals etc. The ethical challenges, especially of not buying into economic systems, were also discussed. However it seemed that above all it is the sense of presence, of silence, calming and caring that mattered. And behind that lay the serving of needs unconditionally.

On the first day there was also an excellent keynote talk, from Chris Cullen from the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, “Mindfulness in the Mainstream”. He explored the meaning of secular and how mindfulness has adapted the Buddha’s teachings, including the Satipattana Sutta, to speak to a secular society. However in the work of most established mindfulness writers and teachers the teachings of the Buddha are being dispersed without the foreign words and iconography. The values are implicit and intrinsic. But there are dilemmas – the corporate world is also using “mindfulness”. In the breakout groups his talk sparked much examination of the role that mindfulness played in chaplaincy, some concerns and some suggestions for future development.

On Sunday, Dr. Andrew Todd, Director of the Centre for Chaplaincy Studies at Cardiff University and an Anglican was the keynote speaker. He looked at the gift of Buddhist chaplaincy to multi-faith chaplaincy in this secular society. How Buddhist teachings had inspired people like Thomas Merton and helped all go into a ‘deeper unknowing’ that is summed up beautifully in the Heart Sutra. Andrew said ‘Prajna-Sunyata, wisdom and emptiness’ cuts through all argument – the cognitive trap’. The panellists discussed this ‘apophatic not knowing’ further as they spoke of their work and the challenges of chaplaincy.

This short summary cannot fully detail the richness of the conference. For more details and papers presented please do contact Keith Munnings keith@eskola.co.uk . If you are doing chaplaincy work or wish to do so please contact him and the Buddhist Healthcare

Chaplaincy group. There is an endorsement body and there are some trainings available and multi-faith training in the pipeline.

Namo Amida Bu

Acharya Modgala Louise Duguid