

In Their Own Words:

Buddhist Military Chaplains and the First Precept

A Dissertation

Presented to

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University of the West

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Buddhist Ministry

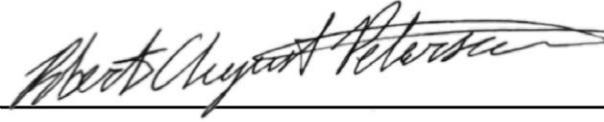
by

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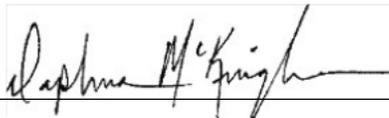


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## **Abstract**

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By

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“Do not kill” is a fundamental ethical guideline found in all Buddhist traditions, yet Buddhist chaplains are embedded in military institutions where they must provide spiritual support to those who have killed and are preparing to kill. This study investigates how and if Buddhist military chaplains believe they are upholding the First Precept of not harming life. This phenomenological study will focus on Buddhist military chaplains with active-duty experience in any branch of the United States military. Analysis was conducted through an ethical framework of literal, relational, and absolute interpretations of the precept “Do not kill” to indicate whether these chaplains are actively participating in this ethical facet of Buddhism. Meeting the ethical injunction to not harm others appears to be negatively impacted by both chaplain isolation and dual relationships towards both troops and the command. Research findings indicate that chaplains believe they are upholding the First Precept by not personally killing others, reducing overall harm, and changing intention behind military violence. Findings also indicate the opportunity for greater consideration of how chaplain interventions may potentially cause harm when viewed in the context of facilitating overall military goals. This exploration of how military chaplains view their ethical responsibilities can provide

new considerations on how Americans traditionally view Buddhism, opportunities of engagement for faith communities supporting military chaplains, and growth for those offering or considering military service.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction, Problem, and Purpose

Most religions uphold certain metaphysical beliefs which lead to specific injunctions on behavior. These injunctions come together in frameworks which are recognized as moral codes for living a good life. Most religions uphold a dual practice of correct belief and correct behavior, with different religions leaning more heavily on one side of this divide or the other. Pan-Buddhist tradition holds a special emphasis on behavior, codified in the precepts which form the foundation of Buddhist ethical practice. While there are many sets of precepts depending on the specific Buddhist tradition and on an individual's level of integration within a specific sect, all Buddhist traditions share the same First Precept of "Do not harm life." Despite the universality of this precept within the Buddhist world, agreement on what type of actual behavior this entails and/or prohibits is far from universally accepted. As one is personally further removed from the act of killing, and violence is shifted from the individual to the state level, this clarity about what constitutes harming life becomes increasingly murky.

While the First Precept is present across all Buddhist traditions, this grey area allows for the tacit approval of Buddhist support for state power and military institutions which are inherently violent. This approval of military violence can be found in the sutras from both the Theravada and Mahayana canons despite military structures using violence as their means of achieving their goals. This all seemingly directly contradicts the First Precept. This scriptural support for military institutions has historically been incorporated into the lived traditions of Buddhist societies, with evidence for Buddhist involvement in military actions present across Asia throughout the common era and into

the present day. As Buddhism continued to spread throughout a modern globalized world, concurrent developments in the United States would soon intersect with traditionally Asian forms of Buddhist support for military structures. The United States guarantees the freedom of religious practice to its service members through both its founding documents and later legal codes. With at most 20,000 self-identified Buddhists in the United States military across all branches, the Department of Defense is legally required to provide religious services to these Buddhist members. This has led to the recent development, recruitment, and introduction of Buddhist military chaplains into the armed forces of the United States. While scriptural arguments are easier to make for the presence of lay Buddhists in the military, Buddhist military chaplains act as religious leaders while also wearing military uniforms. This presents a greater challenge to what is actually meant when that individual holds ordination which requires the adherence to the First Precept of not harming life.

There is current scholarship which explores the role of Buddhist support for military structures in other countries, with only slowly growing research focused on current active-duty Buddhist chaplains in the United States. This gap forms the central question of this study, namely, how do Buddhist military chaplains understand their service to the military in relationship to the First Precept of “Do not harm life.” This question is important because, at face value, a cursory reading of the First Precept and military service appear in direct conflict with each other, implying that there should be very limited or even no Buddhist presence in any military structures, especially for Buddhist religious leaders. This therefore leads to the subsequent question of what

tensions these chaplains feel in their formal allegiance to the military, and how they engage such ethical concerns.

This research project embarks on an ethical exploration within the context of Buddhist military chaplains of the United States military. Through qualitative interviews and subsequent analysis of differences and commonalities, this project will first explore how these Buddhist chaplains came to serve in the US military, along with their understanding of their role and responsibility in supporting military members who engage in violence. This project will then delve into the chaplains' own understanding of how their military work corresponds with their First Precept. Analysis of interviews will utilize aspects of both psychological phenomenology and grounded theory methodological frameworks. Finally, this project will look at any tensions, challenges, or burdens that the intersection of the chaplains' military service and their First Precept create, and what, if anything, can or has been done to address these challenges.

The benefits of a psychological phenomenological framework are that it provides not only a textual examination of the primary research questions outlined above but also incorporates the context or structural framework in which such understandings of the First Precept form and operate. Through exploring both military context and troop interactions, this project will create a greater holistic understanding of the ongoing dynamics which inform the military chaplain's ethical framework and outlook. This exploration will include the chaplains' relationship to both their military command and their home spiritual community, and the chaplain's daily duties. Interview questions, which helped establish this structural framework, included semi-structured inquiries focused on the chaplain's personal background and what led them to becoming a military

chaplain. Questions also included an overview of the chaplain's daily duties and responsibilities, as well as which Buddhist texts and practices the chaplain most utilized. The primary textual questions which focused specifically on the ethics of violence were direct: What is your understanding of the First Precept and how do you engage with this in your work as a military chaplain? From this starting point, other questions, such as how chaplains understand their own responsibility in supporting an inherently violent institution, to how they support people who are preparing to kill and have killed, and how have the chaplains responded when asked if it is right for Buddhists to serve in the military, were also explored. Finally, the chaplains were asked how their own Buddhist community reacted to their choice to join the military. Direct quotations, edited for grammar and brevity, will be provided to support all major claims and findings.

Through gaining a closer understanding of both the commonalities and differences in how these chaplains perceive their work, this research will begin the process of laying a foundation for mutual understanding and support within the various Chaplain Corps of the US military. Given the relatively recent development of Buddhist military chaplaincy within the United States, beginning only in 2004, there are relatively low numbers of Buddhist military chaplains. There are usually fewer than 15 Buddhist chaplains serving at any one time out of the approximately 3000 total chaplains in all branches of the military, but, as will be discussed, this number is only an estimate. As these military chaplains come from numerous Buddhist traditions and the chaplains themselves are spread across numerous branches of the military and duty locations, these low numbers can create a sense of isolation and potential despondency or helplessness as individual chaplains are left to tackle the fundamental questions of ethical behavior alone.

This isolation is from both other Buddhist chaplains due to geographically removed duty stations and overall low census, and from their own Buddhist communities which may or may not fully understand the role and purpose of military chaplaincy. Isolation may also be incurred from ethnic dynamics. Many Buddhist chaplains are of Asian descent, creating increased cultural and social pressure for the chaplains to always have correct answers, and, especially when viewed as monastics, disallowed from doubt or struggle. Power dynamics and discrimination based on both race and religion from within larger military systems may also create increased isolation for these chaplains. While isolation may not normally be considered relevant to the First Precept, these pressures can impact the mental, emotional, and spiritual resources available when faced with ethical questions. This research will explore decisions by some chaplains surrounding weapons training which may have not been normally considered outside of military service, decisions which do relate to the First Precept. Finally, the simple pressure of military service may also have an impact on behavior and outlook, especially in high tension situations. As this research has involved the direct participation of the chaplains, any commonalities which are discovered may help build community and lead to the development of mutual support structures (which some chaplains have already suggested during their interviews) as well as assist them in holding the overall burdens of military service. Furthermore, this research may lead to an increase in understanding of the role and function of Buddhism for both the mainstream population and for academic researchers who are crafting their own academic conclusions about Buddhism and military service, most of whom may never have directly engaged with those Buddhists who have firsthand knowledge of military service. In this same way, this research may

assist the local Buddhist communities of these chaplains, as well as any group with a member considering military chaplaincy. It may also help these communities better understand the true role and function of chaplaincy in a military context, and in supporting these chaplains as human beings through the burdens of their military careers.

This research does face some limitations. The largest limitation has already been mentioned, namely the sample size available. There are comparatively few Buddhist chaplains serving in uniform, which directly impacted recruitment for this research project. Additionally, overall chaplain demographics are not released by the US military, leaving no way to confirm the number of actively serving chaplains or allowing a formal avenue of contact with them. This means that the results from this research may over-represent certain Buddhist traditions, and their responses may skew the presented understandings towards a certain viewpoint. Furthermore, each branch of the military holds slightly different organizational cultures, values, and norms. With a small sample size of chaplains, specific branches of the military and their accompanying values may be overrepresented, which can influence participant responses as the individual chaplains have worked to integrate into their specific organizational culture. This research also faces limitations in ongoing contact, as military service often prevents the opportunity to follow up with participants to gain clarification about interview comments due to the chaplain being deployed, in the field, or simply transferred to a new duty station. Finally, as will be more thoroughly discussed in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, most of the chaplains interviewed were first- or second-generation immigrants and very few had English as their first language. This leads to two considerations. First, while all those interviewed were fluent in English, there still may be some culturally specific terms or inferences

from specific vocabulary which might have been either overlooked by the chaplains themselves in their experiences with native English speakers, or led to incorrect conclusions during data analysis in this project. The second consideration is that cultural norms may also lead to such miscommunications both in the chaplain's military experiences or in the research process. While attempts were made to mitigate these hurdles, as discussed in the methodology section of this research, the impact of these limitations cannot be wholly removed and must be acknowledged.

Upon the conclusion of this introductory chapter, this project will continue with a literature review in Chapter 2. This will include an overview of what has already been established about canonical Buddhist views on military service, how the question of Buddhism and violence has been engaged with by other societies, and the current extent of research on this topic within the United States. This section will also present a limited background on military chaplaincy in general, how it developed in the United States, and the regulations and military norms that it operates under. Chapter 3 will explore the methodology used in this project, the ontological outlook of used in analyzing data results, and the recruitment and interview processes. This chapter will then address how the interviews were analyzed, and what coding processes were used to condense the responses into salient results. Chapter 4 will explore these data results, grouped together in overarching themes. These themes will include both the structural or contextual environments in which the chaplains operate, as well as the textual understanding of the chaplains' ethical outlook and engagement with the First Precept. Chapter 5 will offer a synthesis of these themes, presenting a unifying picture of what this research has shown as the Buddhist military chaplain's engagement and understanding of the First Precept in

a military setting, the burdens they bear, and the opportunities to uphold and support these individuals in their work. This chapter will again explore the overall limitations of this project, how this project fits in with the ongoing academic discussion of Buddhist military engagement, and new areas for continued research. Chapter 6 will conclude with a summary of the key findings discussed in previous chapters, along with closing remarks about the potential future implications of this research and the opportunities which it has opened up to future researchers, the general public, and the Buddhist military chaplains themselves.

Overall, the First Precept will be explored through this research in the hopes of laying a foundation of how modern Buddhist chaplains align with and continue to grow through an understanding of the doctrinal and social union of Buddhism and military service. How modern chaplains understand this shared heritage and responsibility will demonstrate an ongoing dialectic between different priorities and intentions within America's Buddhist community. At the same time, the trajectory of Buddhist chaplaincy will be shown to still be attempting to uphold the First Precept in a military context.

## **Key Terminology**

Before moving into this research itself, a final note should be made about terminology. Chaplains and chaplaincy operate in many settings, both military and civilian, as well as representing any number of different faith traditions. A distilled definition of "chaplain" as presented by Janet McCormack, former United States Air Force chaplain and consultant for the Chaplain Corps of all three branches of the US military, and Naomi Paget, a chaplain who served in the American Red Cross and the

Federal Bureau of Investigations, is a religious or spiritual professional who works primarily in a vocational setting.<sup>1</sup> This broad definition has been echoed across many other modern discussions about chaplaincy as a profession.<sup>2</sup> This will be the working definition of the professional meaning of “chaplain” in this project. However, for ease of reading, throughout this work the term “chaplain” or “chaplaincy” will always mean Buddhist military chaplains and chaplaincy in the United States of America. There are times when chaplains of different faith traditions or different vocational settings are referenced, and at those times their specific non-Buddhist and/or non-military affiliations will always be explicitly stated. Each military branch also has its specific jargon. The Army has soldiers, the Navy has sailors, and the Airforce has airmen, etc., and for those within these services, these names are in no way interchangeable. However, to streamline the text, “service member” and to a lesser extent “troops” is meant to cover all military members of all branches even if the term is not necessarily used by all branches in reference to themselves. Finally, all members of a command, both officers and enlisted are under the spiritual care of the chaplain, however whenever support is mentioned being provided to service members or enlisted members, it is to be understood that this care may extend to those in the officer corps and that officers may avail themselves of all care discussed. In terms of religious terminology, the term “sutra” will be used to reference all scriptures spoken by the Buddha regardless of tradition, though if a text’s title is used, the term “sutra” or “sutta” will be used to better represent the text’s

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<sup>1</sup> Janet McCormack and Naomi Paget, *The Work of the Chaplain* (Valley Forge: Judson’s Press, 2006), iv-v.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Cadge and Shelly Rambo, “An Introduction,” in *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction*, ed. Wendy Cadge and Shelly Rambo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 2.

home tradition. Buddhist figures will be referenced by the Sanskrit spelling of their names, but if an interviewee refers to a figure using a specific non-Sanskrit term, such as “Guanyin” rather than “Avalokiteshvara,” the participant’s own wording will be maintained when directly quoted. Other Buddhist words which have entered common English parlance, such as Buddha, Dharma, or sutra will not be italicized, nor will terms that have full English translations, such as the Eightfold Path. Further terminology which might need definition includes:

**Angulimala:** A murderer who reformed himself as a disciple of the Buddha.

**Bodhisattva:** An enlightened being in Mahayana tradition who remains in the world to serve others out of compassion for all beings.

**Bodhisattva Path:** The process of serving all beings through compassion, primarily in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions.

**Chaplain:** A religious professional (priest, pastor, etc.) who works in a vocational, rather than religious, setting (hospital, school, military, prison, etc.).

**Command / Duty Station:** A self-contained military entity (base, ship, hospital, airfield, etc.) personified through the commanding officer (CO) of that entity (ship captain, hospital colonel, fleet admiral, etc.).

**Disrobing:** A monastic who chooses to give up one’s vows that are usually meant to be lifelong, and become a lay person, foregoing the rights, privileges, and metaphysical authority of the priesthood.

**Eightfold Path:** The behavioral outline of spiritual practice within many Buddhist traditions. When fully practiced, each aspect is simultaneously performed within each other. The Eightfold Path includes Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. See “Right.”

**Endorsement:** Legal declaration from a religious endorsing agency that the individual is fully qualified to represent that organization and its belief system through service as a chaplain. Endorsement is the only religious credential which the United States government may require of a chaplain. See “Endorsing Agency.”

**Endorsing Agency:** Legally recognized religious organization which can vouch (endorse) for a candidate’s religious suitability to serve as a chaplain of that faith tradition within a vocational organization. Each organization determines its own standards for endorsement, which often includes ordination. See “Endorsement.”

**First Precept:** The first of the Five Precepts which are given in most Buddhist denominations as behavioral injunctions. The First Precept is “Do not kill.” This is sometimes translated as “Do not harm living beings.” Different Buddhist traditions hold varying understandings of what not harming living beings entails, ranging from only not intentionally killing humans, to not intentionally harming any form of life, even if death does not result. See “Precepts.”

**Five Precepts:** These are traditionally the first five precepts taken by both monastic and lay Buddhists across most denominations when becoming a Buddhist and form the foundation of ethical behavior. What each precept entails differs slightly between monastics and lay classes. With various English translations, they are almost always presented in the same order. See “Precepts.”

First Precept: Do not kill.

Second Precept: Do not steal.

Third Precept: Do not engage in sexual misconduct.

Fourth Precept: Do not lie.

Fifth Precept: Do not use intoxicants.

**Four Brahma Viharas:** Sometimes translated as the Four Heavenly Abodes, comprised of kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These are seen by many Buddhist traditions as the primary mental states to develop towards both self and others.

**Four Noble Truths:** The first foundational teaching of the Buddha, including 1) mundane life is inherently stressful and eventually dissatisfying, 2) this dissatisfaction and stress come from attachments to outcomes, 3) to remove these attachments will remove this dissatisfaction, 4) the method of removing these attachments, including the Eightfold Path.

**Karma (Collective):** Karma means the results or consequences of past actions. On the collective level it is the result of larger social actions, including both the mundane and the metaphysical. Collective karma includes social structures and the impacts from the development of language and culture, social norms, political actions, religious developments, changes due to laws or regulations, impacts from medicine and education,

and environmental impacts from modernization or population. Collective karma can be viewed as stretching beyond an individual life and traces the trajectory and history of cultures.

**Karma (Individual):** Karma means the results or consequences of past actions. On an individual level, karma can be the basis of personal preferences, choices, and outlooks. Metaphysically, many schools of Buddhism see current situations as having been generated from choices both in this life as well as from previous lives.

**Killing:** To intentionally deprive another being of life. For monastics, the prohibition against killing applies to all living beings. For laity, the prohibition is against killing other humans. The repercussions of killing may be impacted but not eliminated by the type of intention behind killing, i.e. self-defense vs. murder, however the prohibition against killing rests with the actor and not with the recipient, the situation, or the type of threat that may or may not be present.

**Mahayana:** “The Great Vehicle,” a major division of Buddhism which views the Bodhisattva Path and service towards others as the primary mechanism for self-cultivation. Historically, this tradition has been centered on China, Japan, and the Korean peninsula. Some Mahayana schools allow monastics the choice to operate as a priest class, following fewer precepts than outlined in their monastic codes or in a different manner.

**Mindfulness / Right Mindfulness:** Mindfulness by itself is to focus on this-moment awareness without judgement, distraction, or consideration of past or future.

This is different from Right Mindfulness within the Eightfold Path which is informed by an outside moral structure with discernment and future choices being actively engaged and informed by other facets of Buddhist teachings, such as the Eightfold Path, the precepts, or the Four Noble Truths.

**Monastic / Priest:** Buddhist clergy usually fall into either monastic or priest classes based on the specific denomination and the number of behavioral precepts. Monastics are those who have “left home,” usually celibate and living in a temple or other religious group, with a focus on serving a congregation. Monastics usually observe a more scheduled and ritualistic lifestyle structured around up to several hundred behavioral precept rules. Some traditions have both a monastic and a priest class. Priests would traditionally maintain a temple, though not necessarily live there, be able to have a family and have fewer behavioral precepts. Other traditions only have one type of religious professional, but the individual may choose what lifestyle to pursue or flow between the regimented temple-based monastic lifestyle and the more lenient priest-oriented lifestyle.

**Moral Injury:** A perceived violation of a deep held belief or self-conception, leading to distress and shame over self-conception often resulting in anger, a sense of betrayal, and a loss of trust.

**Pan-Buddhism:** All Buddhist traditions and denominations grouped together through their recognition of Shakyamuni Buddha as the founder of the tradition and guided by his teachings. This is an etic view as there are traditions which uphold the

Buddha and his teachings while explicitly rejecting the legitimacy of other traditions which also uphold the Buddha and his teachings. Pan-Buddhist traditions may also acknowledge but not focus on Shakyamuni Buddha as the primary object of veneration.

***Pratimoksha***: The primary text which outlines the full structure of Buddhist monastic behavioral precepts, including all precepts, what constitutes a violation of the precepts, and how to address such violations. This text is primarily maintained within the Theravada branch of Buddhism. While not all traditions use this text to structure their specific monastic codes, most traditions can trace a direct lineage from this text to their own modified codes, especially within the Mahayana and Vajrayana branches of Buddhism.

**Precept**: A precept is a behavioral rule which must be maintained. It is through the maintenance of these precepts that determine one's monastic status after ordination. Different actions may damage or completely break a precept depending on a set of considerations first outlined in the *Pratimoksha*. Precepts can range from large overarching injunctions such as "Do not lie" and "Do not steal," to smaller behavioral requirements such as "Only drink water when sitting down" and "Only sleep laying on your right side." See "First Precept."

**Religious / Christian Hegemony**: The perspective that Christianity has molded many aspects of Western culture to ensure its own predominance, and all other religious traditions must adapt to Christian perspectives of what is correct. This includes structural forms such as only holding religious services on weekends, having public holidays on

Christian holy days, or only recognizing Christian-styled forms of ordination, to more blatant displays of Christian dominance such as passing laws requiring Biblical verses to be displayed in public schools.

**Right- (Right Intention, Right Mindfulness, etc.):** The specific form of each of the Eightfold Path's behaviors, with an understanding that it is possible to have "wrong" intention or "wrong" mindfulness. For example, focusing one's intention on the acquisition of wealth would be considered wrong intention.

**Sutra / Sutta:** Both words meaning "thread," denoting a religious scripture from the Buddhist tradition. "Sutta" is from Pali and usually refers to a scripture from the Theravada tradition, while "Sutra" is from Sanskrit and is used to refer to scriptures from the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. Within a denomination, all scriptures regardless of origin would usually be referred to as sutras or suttas, depending.

**Theravada:** The "School of the Elders," a major branch of Buddhism which focuses on personal development and relinquishment of attachment, centered primarily in Southeast Asia. Most Theravada schools have a strict monastic-laity divide without a priest class.

**Three Refuges / Triple Gem:** The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, or the teacher, the teachings, and the spiritual community. These are considered the three primary objects of veneration in most Buddhist traditions. To become a Buddhist, a person would typically "take refuge" in the Triple Gem.

**Three Views:** See “*Trisvabhava*.”

***Trisvabhava*:** “Three Views” or three different understandings of how to conceive of reality, primarily found in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism. Thoroughly outlined in the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* and later in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Three Views evolved into a moral practice of examining behavior.

**1. Literal:** Mundane perception and literal understandings of the world.

**2. Relational / Compassionate:** Viewing actions in terms of how they impact relationships or uphold compassion with others or oneself. While something might be literally acceptable, for example, not taking a lost wallet, a relational understanding would also indicate that inaction may harm the owner’s situation and so choosing to return the wallet would be the most appropriate choice based on compassion.

**3. Absolute:** Asking how one’s whole lifestyle and actions impact the world and reflect larger truths about ultimate reality, commensurate with an understanding that there is no separation between self and other.

**Upaya:** A primarily Mahayana and Vajrayana outlook, which translates as “skillful means,” and posits that any action which results in a positive outcome is morally legitimate even if the action by itself would normally be considered unacceptable. Upaya is traditionally balanced by the need for great wisdom to understand the outcome of an action, especially a morally dubious one.

**Vajrayana:** The “Thunderbolt Vehicle” is a major branch of Buddhism, developing from, and sometimes subsumed within, the Mahayana tradition. Vajrayana

practice is unique in that it emphasizes esoteric practices as a primary form of self-cultivation. Vajrayana traditions are most commonly found in Tibet and Mongolia.

**Zen:** A denomination or sect of Mahayana Buddhism primarily based in Japan, with similar “Chan,” “Seon,” and “Thien” schools in China, Korea, and Vietnam, emphasizing meditation and sudden realization as mechanism for self-cultivation.

## **Bracketing of Personal Experience**

*Chapter 3: Methodology* will offer a full discussion of the methodology used for this project, but one aspect of this framework should be discussed now as its non-standard impact on this research may be noted and questioned prior to that chapter. This project utilizes psychological phenomenology as one of its primary methodological processes. One of the advantages of psychological phenomenology is that it employs a function called bracketing. Bracketing acknowledges that it is not possible to fully remove an individual researcher from their own history, outlook, assumptions, and preconceptions when conducting qualitative research. As all reality is ultimately filtered through each of an individual’s own personal physical and mental strata, psychological phenomenology gives these perspectives a dedicated place to be shared. This allows readers to understand how a researcher is personally situated towards the research topic and hence what preconditioned assumptions the researcher may be operating under. For example, someone conducting a study on police violence who was also a victim of police brutality would likely view the results through a specific lens of personal experience regardless of what formal methodology was employed. Psychological phenomenology

posits that giving space for one's personal interactions with a research topic allows a better context for understanding how certain aspects of the research were formed, how the data was understood, and the assumptions or lived experiences that may have been at play when crafting research questions or drawing conclusions. With this consideration, it is in this section that I, the researcher and author, will now situate myself.

The question of the First Precept is of personal relevance to me. I am a white male, born and raised in the United States. My first trip outside of the US took place in 1989 when I visited China, but it was not until 1998 that I began formal academic studies of Asian history and religion. I spent approximately 8 years in Taiwan and mainland China, though Buddhism was not a focus during that time. My personal relationship with China was abrasive as I am conversant in Mandarin and received continual doses of Chinese nationalism due to the assumption that I would not be able to understand Chinese or what was shouted at me. Perhaps due to this continual reminder of mainland Chinese political perspectives, which included having a local newspaper closed down by the government for printing the line "June can be difficult," which was viewed as a politically subversive reference to the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, it highlighted to me the rights and freedoms which are enjoyed in the United States and Taiwan, but are not present in China – including what was required to maintain such rights.

This, coupled with continued uncertainty about future career orientation, led me to join the US Navy in 2011. I served as a Hospital Corpsman and was deployed to the Middle East twice during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve. As might be expected, military service was physically, emotionally, and psychologically difficult. During one darker moment I remembered my academic Buddhist studies. I

attempted to put that half-remembered knowledge into practice, and I was surprised at the efficacy of primarily Zen practices on my emotional equilibrium. My meditative practice slowly developed from a personal mental health intervention into a deeper spiritual practice. I began studying with my first spiritual teacher and ended up sharing what I had learned with my shipmates. This led to my appointment as the Buddhist Lay Leader for my ship and introduced me to military chaplaincy. A lay leader is an active-duty, non-chaplain service member who is authorized to lead religious services on board ship. I left active duty after five years and joined the Reserves with the intention of meeting qualifications and returning to the Navy as a Buddhist chaplain. I applied to the Buddhist Chaplaincy MDiv Program at the University of the West and concurrently continued my spiritual training, now at Sozenji Buddhist Temple, Montebello, CA, first under Rev. Shuichi Kurai and later Rev. Gyoeki Yokoyama, in the Soto Shu tradition of Zen Buddhism. It is in this tradition that I continue practicing to this day, having received novice ordination in 2017. Desiring to expand my pan-Buddhist familiarity, I cultivated relationships with several Theravada monastics and served as an outreach coordinator at Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Temple for three years, where I officiated the newly introduced Buddhist English Service on weekends. Upon graduation from University of the West, I completed a two-year clinical pastoral education (CPE) residency and fellowship at the Veterans Administration (VA) Loma Linda Medical Center which took place during the height of COVID. I was eventually hired as the second of only two Buddhist chaplains in the entire VA (now three). To gain employment, I established Sozenji Buddhist Temple as the second-only Buddhist endorsing organization for chaplains in the VA system and have since helped a third Buddhist organization become an endorsing body for the VA as

well. During this time, I continued to serve as a commissioned US Navy Chaplain Candidate, officiating Sunday Buddhist religious services at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD), San Diego, until age and health led to my resignation from the US Navy in 2022. I now continue to work full-time at VA Loma Linda Medical Center as the spiritual care coordinator for our Community Living Center and Hospice and Palliative Care programs, having received both Board Certification for chaplaincy and Advanced Certification for chaplaincy in hospice and palliative care.

During my time in the US Navy, I engaged with the ethical struggle over the First Precept and my military service. I had joined the military before I considered myself a Buddhist or used the precepts as benchmarks for my own actions, despite being labeled a Buddhist by my Recruit Division Commanders as early as my first few weeks in boot camp. My return to Buddhism in the Navy began with a very narrow focus, namely, how to survive one more day without harming myself or others. It was only after this more immediate need was engaged that I started to examine my larger context. In the struggle of understanding my military service within the context of my growing Buddhist beliefs, I soon discovered many facets of military service obscured from most civilians. These discoveries eased several of my doubts. The biggest shock was in discovering how few decisions military members were allowed to enact independently, with almost every major command and order needing authorization from civilian authorities. This ranged from decisions about course corrections of the ship to civilian lawyers joining flight operations to authorize military strikes as legal. For me, this positioned the larger questions of military ethics squarely in the civilian and political realm, including where truly effective advocacy for change would need to take place.

The next major understanding was how much military service was designed to ensure the freedom of the seas, and that most Navy operations served to ensure commercial shipping lanes remained open. As one of my chiefs said, “The only reason you can watch your big-screen TV is because of us.” While he was certainly trying to show how the US Navy heroically upholds the American dream, what I personally heard was that our presence across all branches of the military was largely based on American civilian consumerism, from our desire for big screen TVs to our demands for cheap oil – another present understanding as my time in the Middle East lengthened – and so again, real change to military priorities would need to be enacted through social action and a cultural reflection on personal civilian lifestyle choices. These two realizations allowed me to reorient my ethical questions away from larger military considerations and back towards my own personal behavior.

My precept practice is undergirded by the First Bodhisattva Vow of serving all beings.<sup>3</sup> The First Bodhisattva Vow is recited in the Soto Zen tradition as “beings are numerous, I vow to free them.”<sup>4</sup> I personally reread this as a vow to “serve” rather than “free” all beings. This shifts consideration from theoretical judgement –*should* I act in this situation – to one of practicality – *how* can I act in this situation and *why* am I doing it. My internal process turned out to not be unique when many recruits at MCRD approached me over the years to ask if it was right to serve in the military, despite having already signed a four-year contract which would require them to serve regardless of what

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<sup>3</sup> Shohaku Okumura, *Living by Vow: A Practical Introduction to Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Sotoshu Shumuchō, “Four Vows,” in *Sotoshu Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice* (Tokyo: Soto Zen Text Project, 2001), 74.

Buddhism had to say. My own ultimate response to the question of being a Buddhist in the military, therefore, came down to access. Military members fall under the universal Bodhisattva Vow, and so the ethical question is not whether to serve them but rather how to access them. It is very hard for a civilian to walk onto a military facility, and so if someone like myself already has access to this population then my moral obligation would be to serve these individuals who are beyond the easy reach of most other Buddhists. In this way, the question of how to operate as a Buddhist authentically and ethically in a military setting given the predominance of the First Precept has continued to be in the forefront of my mind for over a decade now, even after my final separation from the military.

As Buddhism continues to increase in national popularity, this will be a recurring question for both Buddhist devotees and ordained religious service providers. It is this consideration that underwrites how I understand my own military service as well as the work of the chaplains that I researched for this project. As will be discussed throughout this study, most of the Buddhist chaplains who served or are serving in the military are of Asian descent, many of them first-generation immigrants. This brings up the question of cross-cultural communication, both between the chaplains and their experiences in the United States military, as well as how I, an enculturated American from birth, understand what is said to me. This very topic is brought up by some of the research participants themselves, and is part of the reason why such an extensive use of direct quotations from the chaplains are used, so that even if my own interpretations may miss the mark, the words of the chaplains will be preserved to speak for themselves. As will be discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, there is a history of silencing Asian voices in the United

States, even surrounding topics which ostensibly define some Asian community's identity, in this case Buddhism, and so it is of immense value that so many of the research participants are Asian in order to understand how people enculturated in these societies understand their role as a chaplain. This situation is also helpful as it may serve as a benchmark if the thinking surrounding Buddhist military chaplaincy evolves if a greater number of either convert or enculturated American chaplains begin to augment current Buddhist chaplain demographics.

Returning to how I situate myself in this project, my own personal military and vocational chaplaincy experience may have assisted in my own understanding of what the chaplains have attempted to communicate to me. Moving forward, as relevant memories or personal commentary appear which may not fully fit within an academic and purportedly impartial research project, I will make note of these instances with footnoted comments.<sup>5</sup> This will serve the dual function of both allowing readers to understand when my own personal history is activated as well as perhaps providing a further perspective for those who have struggled with these same questions.

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<sup>5</sup> Footnoted comments will appear in the text like this.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Buddhism within the United States has garnered a specific flavor of practice since it was introduced into mainstream consciousness beginning in the 1960s and 70s.

Authors such as Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg have created a felt sense of Buddhism within the United States as open, easy going, and pacifistic, while more formal representatives of Buddhism such as Shunryu Suzuki, Chongyam Trungpa, and S. N. Goenka, have continued upholding what many Buddhists would agree to as the non-disruptive, non-reactive, cultivation of inner peace reiterated time and again in the sutras. The theme of non-violence is espoused in many of the bestselling and most famous books on Buddhism in the United States, including the works of Thich Nhat Hanh, and in Ven. Walpola Rahula Thero's classic, *What the Buddha Taught*.<sup>6</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh is especially noteworthy in helping introduce Buddhism into Western consciousness through a consistent anti-war framework. This began with his efforts to stop US military action in his native Vietnam, gaining enough traction for his sentiments to be included in the congressional record in 1966, to his urging for peace after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the US World Trade Center buildings.<sup>7</sup> Another notable example is Alan Watts, an erstwhile Western convert to Buddhism who became famous for introducing and interpreting Buddhist and other Eastern texts for Western

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<sup>6</sup> Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Buddha's Teaching* (London: Random House, 1998), 194-199; Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 47.

<sup>7</sup> Nhat Hanh, "A Proposal for Peace," in *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 49; "After 9/11: Ignorance, Discrimination, Fear and Violence are Real Enemies of Humanity," Democracy Now, January 25, 2022, [https://www.democracynow.org/2022/1/25/john\\_dear\\_on\\_thich\\_nhat\\_hanh](https://www.democracynow.org/2022/1/25/john_dear_on_thich_nhat_hanh).

audiences.<sup>8</sup> He personally struggled with the idea of military service and concluded that war in any form and for any reason was a worthless pursuit.<sup>9</sup> Many Asian missionary thinkers as well as enculturated Western converts have used a Buddhist lens to explore, struggle with, and ultimately reject military service. This has led to a common perception in American society that Buddhism is a religion of peace which abhors violence and hence would not support the military. This perception of peaceful Buddhism has been embraced by Hollywood celebrities such as Richard Gere, and is so ubiquitous that it has even graced cromulent episodes of *The Simpsons*.<sup>10</sup>

It may therefore come as a surprise that through a review of canonical, lived-tradition, and historical research and literature, a picture of Buddhist practice is created which holds no prohibitions against certain types of military support and even tacit approval of the military. When looking at the tradition as a whole, this is not a new discovery for Buddhists who are often, if not surprised, at least despondent with the ongoing cycle of violence in both Buddhist and secular societies.<sup>11</sup> This question of intransigent violence was asked directly to the Buddha, indicating that even 4500 years ago people were asking this same question.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore perhaps exactly because the Buddha's teachings are set in opposition to the cycle of attachments, jealousies, hatred,

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<sup>8</sup> James Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America: A Sourcebook on American Religious Conversion Autobiography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 199.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Watts, "A Problem of Strategy," *The Library of Consciousness*, 1960, <https://www.organism.earth/library/document/a-problem-of-strategy>.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Moore, dir., *The Simpsons*, Season 13, episode 6, "She of Little Faith," aired December 16, 2001, on Fox, [https://simpsonswiki.com/wiki/She\\_of\\_Little\\_Faith](https://simpsonswiki.com/wiki/She_of_Little_Faith).

<sup>11</sup> Bodhi, *The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2016), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Sujato, "Sakkapanha Sutta (DN 21)," *Sutta Central*, accessed August 17, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/dn21/en/sujato>.

and stinginess as outlined in the Buddha's response to this question of ongoing violence, that Buddhism as a received tradition today is perceived to have risen above such base desires and so, by extension, Buddhist practitioners and their societies. The Buddha himself attempted several times to prevent wars, until finally failing to stem this most human motivation and being forced to witness the massacre of his home Shakya clan by an invading army.<sup>13</sup>

In the face of this history of violence, the mainstream American perception of Buddhism continues to be that of internal equanimity and compassionate, non-violent, service to others as its primary goal.<sup>14</sup> This equanimity is usually seen as diametrically opposed to the heightened passions and activities of military service. This then leads to the question of how the presence and role of Buddhist military chaplains in the United States can be understood, especially in relationship to pan-Buddhist teachings on non-violence. Perhaps more importantly, how do these chaplains who represent pan-Buddhist tradition within the military see the relationship between the espoused pacificism of Buddhism tradition and their own military service?

This project intends to explore this overarching question by focusing on four specific research areas. The first is discovering who the individuals serving as chaplains are, their religious backgrounds, and what motivated them to join the US military. Second, this project seeks to understand how these chaplains view their own relationship to the First Precept of "Do not harm life." Third, is an exploration of how these chaplains

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<sup>13</sup> Sayadaw Mingun, *The Great Chronicles of the Buddhas* (Yangon: Ti-Ni Publishing Center, 2024), 1362-1363.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Mitchell, *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Context* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 215-217.

view their own responsibility towards supporting an inherently violent institution such as the US military, and finally seeking to uncover what tensions, burdens, and challenges these chaplains face, especially as they relate to the First Precept.

To begin unpacking these questions, this chapter will look into several mutually reinforcing areas which set up the background of the historical, religious, and social context that these chaplains have entered into. This exploration will stretch back to the founding of Buddhism and explore what current scholarship has already discovered about these topics. The initial step will involve brief comments about how this literature review was conducted as well as the parameters which were established for the topics reviewed.

The first question of exploring who these chaplains are and why they joined the military presupposes an understanding of the First Precept. To ensure this understanding is present, the first section of this chapter will begin with the canonical sources of the First Precept and its accompanying scriptural resources and interpretations, especially as they relate to military service and violence.

The second major focus of this project is how modern chaplains understand their relationship to the First Precept, especially given their military service. To form a context for this conversation, the next two sections of this chapter will explore the canonical and scriptural resources which can be interpreted as condoning violence and legitimizing the presence of military structures within a Buddhist framework. This chapter will then explore how different Buddhist societies throughout history have incorporated these pro-military resources into their own social structures and how the accretion of history and social tradition have created a place for military service and violence within self-identified Buddhist cultures.

The third key area of consideration is how these chaplains understand their own responsibility towards supporting military violence. In order to understand this aspect of chaplaincy, the discussion of Buddhist tradition will shift to the United States with an exploration of the evolution of Buddhism in the United States military. This will lead into an overview of religious freedom in the United States and how this value is upheld in the military, especially through the role and presence of military chaplains. This will be followed by a specific discussion of the development and inclusion of Buddhist military chaplains starting in 2004 and continuing through to the present.

Finally, to begin outlining the discussion on how these tensions between the First Precept and military service may impact modern chaplains, brief comments will be made about some of the ethical tensions and burdens already discovered to be challenging military chaplains, both Buddhist and otherwise.

## **Review Processes and Parameters**

For research that focuses on military chaplains, outside of any specific religious tradition, this topic immediately encounters an intersection of numerous historical, administrative, and relational streams, not all of which are directly relevant to the ethical considerations of a specific religious group. For this reason, there are several facets of military service common across all spectrums of both the enlisted and officer experience which will not be addressed in this project. This includes topics such as differences in training regimens between officers and enlisted, the rights and privileges of rank, the socialization of new recruits into military organization culture, or the differences of the priorities and responsibilities between the different branches of service. The focus of this

research and the direction of the literature review deals exclusively with how Buddhist chaplains relate to Buddhist understandings and manifestations of their own religious tradition within the context of supporting the spiritual needs of the people they serve.

Each branch of the military has its own specific regulations, instructions, and orders. These are all overseen by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the United States Federal Government writ large. For this reason, most military-specific information presented at a level lower than the Department of Defense will focus on Navy Chaplaincy due to my own history as both an enlisted Navy Buddhist Lay Leader and Navy Chaplain Candidate. In this research, no substantive differences between the requirements or privileges of military chaplaincy across the various branches of military service were found, but to demonstrate uniformity across all branches of the armed forces, an effort was made to only cite regulations from the Department of Defense or higher.

This literature review was formed through library searches, review of published policies and directives from federal government departments, such as the Department of Defense, and online academic searches. This was achieved by reviewing the *Congressional Research Service*, and academic database searches. Databases such as *Proquest*, *Jstor*, *Ebsco*, and *Google Scholar* were utilized in searching for journal articles, books, and other indexed published materials. Key words for these searches included “Buddha (-ism, -ist, etc.), military,” “Buddha, military chaplain,” “Buddha, violence,” “Buddha, army,” and “Buddha, soldier.” These searches brought back results detailing research conducted on Buddhist militarism in many different countries and time periods, which were reviewed for relevance to this project. Relevance was mostly defined as any research from any country covering time periods after World War II, or general

discussions of Buddhism and violence from any period not focused on niche historical figures or limited time periods. Most of the more recent research on Buddhist militarism focused on Southeast Asian societies, all of which were incorporated in this literature review below to provide context for the presence of Buddhist chaplains in the US military. The development and understanding of Buddhist violence in other countries was deemed relevant since many of the current Buddhist chaplains in the United States are first- or second-generation immigrants from these countries as will be outlined in *Chapter 3: Methodology*. From these findings, dedicated journals such as the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, the *Journal of Religion and Violence*, and the *Journal of Military Ethics* were reviewed. Specific searches for singular Buddhist traditions such as “Chan” or “Shingon,” were not included as these sources would necessarily have the term “Buddhism” somewhere in its text, such as “Zen Buddhism.” Broader searches such as “military, chaplain,” “religion, military” or “religion, violence” were also not used as initial sweeps returned tremendous amounts of research focusing on different religious traditions and their own responses to the question of military violence. While there may be some use in comparing or contrasting other religious traditions with Buddhism, until such a time as Buddhist traditions are able to establish for themselves their own views towards military violence in the United States, such interfaith explorations may be premature.

This study focuses on the Buddhist chaplain’s ethical relationship to violence within the United States military, as opposed to a discussion about what should or should not be used to determine “military ethics” in general. Some scholars, as demonstrated through the works of Cook and Syse, have acknowledged, but sidelined, the role of

religion in determining how military ethics should operate, positing that actions which achieve mission-accomplishment in a way that is legal and have a historical precedent are the only primary factors needed to determine if a military action is ethical.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, Paul Robinson demonstrates how some countries actively exclude chaplains from military ethics training, including a discussion of a US Air Force investigation in 2005 which showed that religious adherence actively prevented critical thinking and moral decision making in the military.<sup>16</sup> Such comments will hopefully be deeply concerning for both those who either accept or reject religion as a moral guide, as both of the above stances appear to legitimize any action whatsoever as “ethical.” At the same time, author John Carlson has rightly pointed out that religious beliefs and outlooks cannot be discarded if one is hoping to understand, let alone direct, US military culture, priorities, or action.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, before it can be determined where Buddhist chaplains might land on the discussion of what constitutes ethical behavior from the view of a military institution writ large, what Buddhist chaplains believe ethical behavior to be within their own individual context as both a Buddhist and a military service member must first be explored. The need for this discussion will be echoed again when discussing the ethical tensions in military chaplain service, since they derive from the same source, namely a lack of clarity about a chaplain’s ultimate role and purpose in the military. As mentioned previously, scholars who have never served in the military have written extensively about

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Cook and Henrik Syse, “What Should We Mean by ‘Military Ethics,’” *Journal of Military Ethics* 9, no. 2 (2019): 120-121.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Robinson, “Ethics Training and Development in the Military,” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 37, no. 1 (2007): 28.

<sup>17</sup> John Carlson, “Cashing in on Religion’s Currency? Ethical Challenges for a Post-Secular Military,” *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 7, no. 4 (2010): 55.

what Buddhism's relationship to the military "should be," but very little research has been conducted with those who have first-hand knowledge of the military or direct experience of melding their military duties with their religious and ethical beliefs. Focusing on Buddhist military chaplains from the context of their own religious tradition and through the lens of their first ethical obligation, i.e. the First Precept, will hopefully open the doorway for future researchers to explore larger questions about Buddhism's response to overarching topics of military ethics or interfaith dialogue.

### **Canonical Sources of the First Precept**

This research project begins by asking why Buddhists join the military as chaplains if military service appears to contradict the First Precept. To appreciate the importance of this question, the definition, predominance, and function of the First Precept in pan-Buddhist tradition must first be examined. The greatest consideration and one of the key foundations of most discussions surrounding Buddhist military service in any capacity is the First Precept. Across all Buddhist traditions, the First Precept is a simple grammatical variation of "Do not kill."<sup>18</sup>

The reason the First Precept is viewed as holding such importance across pan-Buddhist tradition can be traced to the Buddha's first sermon after gaining enlightenment. After agreeing to teach all beings the path to liberation that he had realized, the Buddha outlined the foundational teaching of his entire path in the scripture *Setting in Motion the*

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<sup>18</sup> Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 172.

*Wheel of the Dharma Sutta*.<sup>19</sup> In this scripture, the Four Noble Truths are outlined, which essentially state that suffering and hence liberation deal exclusively with clinging to attachments. The Third Noble Truth shows that to shed all of one's attachments is to realize spiritual liberation. Attachments are both positive and negative, either desiring or hating something, with either one requiring a strong emotional entanglement with the object, be it a person, concept, goal or value. To link such attachments to killing, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, a predominant modern Theravada scholar, translator, and monastic undertook a study of the *Pratimoksha*, the foundational text which outlines all monastic behavioral rules and the necessity for their adherence.<sup>20</sup> This text forms the foundation of all further precept texts which will be explored below. In discussing the *Pratimoksha*, Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains that to kill another human is called a *parajika*, a downfall or defeat, the heaviest moral indictment in Buddhism. The reason killing is considered one of only four transgressions which carry the highest of all indictments, is because killing requires such an extreme level of attachment and has such a profound impact on the moral and spiritual practice of the perpetrator, that the person has...

Surrendered to his own mental defilements to such an extent that he defeats the purpose of his having become a bhikkhu in the first place. The irrevocable nature of this defeat is illustrated in the Vibhanga (Vinaya) with a number of similes: "as a man with his head cut off... as a withered leaf freed from its stem..." A bhikkhu who commits any of these offenses severs himself irrevocably from the life of the Sangha and is no longer considered a bhikkhu.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bodhi, "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma (SN 56.11)," Sutta Central, accessed August 17, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi>.

<sup>20</sup> "Bhikkhu" (male) or "Bhikkuni" (female) is the Pali term of address for a Buddhist monastic, mostly used in the Theravada Tradition.

<sup>21</sup> Thanissaro, *The Buddhist Monastic Code 1*, 3rd ed. (Valley Center: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013), 46.

While simply disrobing can appear to be an escape clause here – simply disrobe, kill, and then retake one’s vows – the *Pratimoksha* explains that any *parajika* defeat is so significant that to succumb to it means that the individual is morally and spiritually “disqualified from ever becoming a bhikkhu again in this lifetime.”<sup>22</sup> The role of the First Precept within the Theravada tradition is viewed as literal, with little room for metaphorical interpretation.<sup>23</sup>

Understanding the significance of both life and the taking of life, the *Pratimoksha*, expands and clarifies what the First Precept entails:

If any bhikkhu should deliberately deprive a human being of life, or should seek an assassin for him, or should praise the attractiveness of death, or should incite him to death saying: “Dear man, what use is this bad, wretched life for you? Death is better than life for you!” should he, having such-thought-and-mind, having such thought-and-intention, praise in manifold ways the beauty of death or incite him to death, he also is disqualified, not in communion.<sup>24</sup>

Here, the First Precept is expanded to include not only killing others directly but also includes encouraging others to kill. This demonstrates that the situation a person finds themselves in, or the reason behind killing, is a secondary consideration with little difference between murder or self-defense, let alone battlefield actions. As will be discussed below, later texts appear to subsume such legalistic arguments to legitimize killing in some situations. This text also appears to prohibit suicide or the glorification of self-harm, a teaching that is reiterated in the *Vesali Sutta*.<sup>25</sup> In this text the Buddha

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>23</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw, *Manual of Insight* (Somerville: Wisdom Publication, 2016), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Nanatusita, *The Bhikkhu Patimokkha: A Word for Word Translation* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2014), 26.

<sup>25</sup> Sujato, “Vesali Sutta (SN54.9),” Sutta Central, accessed July 13, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/sn54.9/en/sujato>.

laments presenting human life in such negative terms that it led monks to kill themselves in his absence. To engage in any of these forms of violence would be viewed as violating the First Precept. The *Pratimoksha* also outlines the sequence of actions and intentions necessary for a precept to be broken.<sup>26</sup> First, the monastic must know that the being is alive. Then the monastic must intend to kill it. Then the monastic must carry out the action of killing, and finally the being must die as a result of the action. If any of these steps are missing, such as not intending to kill despite carrying out an action or not realizing that something is alive, the perpetrator will still carry a karmic burden but will not be considered to have fully broken the precept. While this discussion appears to necessarily preclude military service, the *Pratimoksha* later extends the discussion on the First Precept by explicitly stating that monastics may not take part in any military functions or spend more than three days in the company of soldiers.<sup>27</sup>

Further elucidating what types of behavior the First Precept entails, the *Mahavagga*, a commentary text from the Vinaya section of the Pali Canon, not only states that one should neither kill, nor encourage others to kill, but anyone who “lives off archery...is a soldier, not a brahmin,” i.e. not a virtuous person who has shed attachments.<sup>28</sup> It takes little effort to extend this censure of archery to more modern projectile weapons, and referencing the military service of soldiers, such service is presented here as inconsistent with the Buddhist path of practice. More explicitly, in terms of military service and the use of institutional violence, the *Sangama Sutta* explores the

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<sup>26</sup> Thanissaro, *Buddhist Monastic Code*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Nanatusita, *Bhikkhu Patimokkha*, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Sujato, “Mahavagga,” Sutta Central, accessed August 26, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/snp3.9/en/sujato>.

results of a battle between two kings, with the victor thinking that he is secure in his victory. Upon hearing this the Buddha states “A killer creates a killer, a conqueror creates a conqueror, an abuser creates abuse, and a bully creates a bully. And so as deeds unfold the plunderer is plundered.”<sup>29</sup> Here the Buddha explains that when military violence is used to resolve a conflict, nothing is actually resolved and instead the violence simply reproduces itself in the next generation or at the next point of contention. In the *Yodhajiva Sutta*, this theme is reiterated with a direct condemnation of military violence in a direct response to a warrior chieftain who asks the Buddha to confirm the belief that those who die in battle are honorably reborn in paradise.<sup>30</sup> The Buddha denies this and states that anyone who engages in battle and is slain is rather reborn in hell. Consistent with the *Pratimoksha*, the Buddha does describe such soldiers who are reborn in hell as also having joy and intention in killing, leaving open the question about what happens to those who do fight and kill in the military but have neither joy nor intention in that violence.

Overall, these two sutras show in combination that when military violence is used, no positive outcomes can occur for those fighting in this moment, for the combatant’s own future, or for the future wellbeing of the state or institution that uses violence to achieve its goals. The modern impact of wartime actions on veterans demonstrate the validity of these sutras with Vietnam-era veterans continuing to psychologically transfer

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<sup>29</sup> Sujato, “Sangamasutta (SN3.15),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://suttacentral.net/sn3.15/en/sujato>.

<sup>30</sup> Sujato, “Yodhajivasutta (SN42.3),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://suttacentral.net/sn42.3/en/sujato>.

military traumas onto their understanding of current situations even 50 years later.<sup>31</sup> This is further demonstrated more recently with close to 30% of service members who participated in Operation Enduring Freedom being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome, despite the relatively few casualties sustained by the United States military during this operation compared to other historical wartime engagements by the United States.<sup>32</sup> As the Buddha stated above, the plunderer is plundered. The results of these discussions within the Theravada tradition and their real-world manifestations all stem from the same root cause, the First Precept which forbids killing.

This First Precept is reiterated in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. The *Brahmajala Sutra*, which outlines the precepts for Mahayana and Vajrayana monastics, reiterates this precept several times throughout its text, the most comprehensive discussion stating,

My disciples, if you yourself kill, or you incite someone else to kill, or you participate in the planning of a killing, or praise killing, or enjoy seeing someone kill, or kill by magical spells, then you have the causes of killing, the conditions of killing, the method of killing, the act of killing; this holds true even for the accidental killing of any form of life.<sup>33</sup>

This reiterates almost verbatim the *Pratimoksha*'s stance not only on killing, but also on encouraging others to kill or finding pleasure in killing. This text also appears to combine different parts of the *Pratimoksha*, namely both the prohibition of killing as well as the internal steps of being aware of killing, planning to kill, acting in violence and

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<sup>31</sup> R. A. Peterson, "Reflecting Clear Moonlight" in *Refuge in the Storm*, ed. Nathan Jishin Michon (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2023), 160.

<sup>32</sup> Department of Veterans Affairs, "How Common is PTSD in Veterans?" last modified March 25, 2025, [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common\\_veterans.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp).

<sup>33</sup> A. Charles Muller and Kenneth Tanaka, *The Brahma's Net Sutra* (Moraga: BDK America, 2017), 44.

succeeding in killing. As mentioned above, this sequential process is important as missing one step can ameliorate one's moral responsibility towards causing a death, while at the same time maintaining that the moral implications of causing even accidental death must be viewed with the same seriousness as intentional killing for either personal or state-sanctioned reasons. The authors of the *Brahmajala Sutra* in the above quote appear to have heard excuses about not intending to kill and so not being responsible for one's actions and subsumes this argument in its final statement about accidental killing still holding the same karmic burden as intentional killing.

Larger texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Surangama Sutra* both extol the virtues of the “fundamental precepts” which “are the ones that forbid killing.”<sup>34</sup> In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the assumption is that one already knows what the Five Precepts are and those who walk the path of awakening should begin with the training of moral action, stating, “when taking on and training in the precepts, he should vow ‘May all beings thoroughly study the moral precepts and not commit any of the many sorts of evil deeds.’”<sup>35</sup> The injunction to maintain the precepts, including the First Precept, is so strong that a simple word search of the first 25 chapters of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, find the precepts being mentioned 110 times. The assumption that killing is inherently immoral and so self-evident that it does not need to be specifically singled out occurs throughout many other texts. These include Changdragomin's, a predominant 5<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan teacher, *Twenty Verses on the Bodhisattva Vow*, as presented by Geshe Sonam Richen, an

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<sup>34</sup> Gene Reeves, *The Lotus Sutra: A Contemporary Translation of a Buddhist Classic* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2008), 155; Hsuan Hua, *The Surangama Sutra* (Ukaiah: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2009), 221.

<sup>35</sup> Hsuan Hua, *The Flower Adornment Sutra*, vol.1 (Seattle: Kalavinka Press, 2022), 317.

equally predominant modern Vajrayana scholar and transmitter of Buddhist teachings to the West, where the First Precept is subsumed in the simple exhortation to “disdain the immoral.”<sup>36</sup>

The First Precept also applies to the laity and is often presented in similar if not identical language as used in discussing monastic standards. The *Upasaka Precepts Sutra*, with “upasaka” meaning a lay follower of the Buddha, the First Precept is again reiterated in similar language, including the indictment of both killing and encouraging others to kill, concluding, “The precept against killing is called the first cardinal precept.”<sup>37</sup>

Many modern sources discussing Buddhist tradition follow in the footsteps of these scriptural texts, both in terms of wording and in presenting the First Precept as a cardinal undertaking when beginning along the path of awakening. An English translation that has been used for this precept for at least the past 80 years, from 1959 onward, is “to abstain from taking life.”<sup>38</sup> Modern iterations of the First Precept can be found throughout both academic literature, such as Robert Aitken’s classic exploration on Buddhist ethics in *Mind of Clover*, that presents the precept simply as “No killing.”<sup>39</sup> Chanting books used by denominational congregations such as those in the Soto Zen community also simply state “Do not kill.”<sup>40</sup> The precept guides that are provided free

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<sup>36</sup> Sonam Rinchen, *The Bodhisattva Vow* (Ithica: Snow Lion Publications, 2000), 139.

<sup>37</sup> Heng-Ching, *The Sutra on Upasaka Precepts* (Berkeley: BDK America, 1994), 79.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959), 70; Henepola Gunaratana, *Buddhist Suttas for Recitation* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2019), 7.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Aitken, *Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* (New York: North Point Press, 1984), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Sotoshu Shumicho, “The Meaning of Practice and Verification,” in *Sotoshu Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice* (Tokyo: Soto Zen Text Project, 2001), 89.

to local populations from local temples, such as those offered by transnational Buddhist organizations such as Fo Guang Shan, state the First Precept is “to refrain from killing.”<sup>41</sup> All of these community sources are easily available from local temples, congregations, and websites, throughout the United States. Regardless of denomination or verbosity, throughout the pan-Buddhist tradition, the First Precept is practically universal in both its primacy and its simple injunction: Do not kill.

## **Canonical Sources of Support for Military Violence**

With so many explicit sources within the various Buddhist canons which forbid killing, it may come as a surprise that there are some scriptural texts which appear to promote, or at least sanction, violence. These sources become important to understand as they form the resources through which historical Buddhist cultures have integrated militarism and violence into their own societies. These societies form the antecedents to the strains of American Buddhism which are represented by the chaplains in the military today. These sources therefore form the first step in uncovering the context for the second primary question of this study, namely how Buddhist military chaplains understand their own relationship to the First Precept.

While far fewer than the texts which decry killing, supportive statements for military violence can be found throughout all classes of Buddhist scriptural authority, from the sutras themselves to the canonized commentary texts which expound on the

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<sup>41</sup> Hsing Yun, *The Core Teachings: Essays in Basic Buddhism* (Hacienda Heights: Buddha’s Light Publishing, 2016), 153.

direct teachings of the Buddha or explore the sacred histories of certain cultures. Within the Theravada tradition, even before the question of direct killing comes about, the Buddha already creates a space where behavioral rules, and explicitly the Five Precepts each by name, are not viewed as the ultimate authority when it comes to questions of behavior. In the *Velama Sutta*, the Buddha states that more important than the Five Precepts is cultivating a heart of compassion, and more important than compassion is realizing the truth of impermanence.<sup>42</sup> While this text still has its ultimate goal on enlightenment, the precepts are already not seen as the ultimate and final concern of the Buddha. The *Kesi Sutta*, witnesses the Buddha responding to the question of what he would do if someone refused to adhere to his teachings. He replies, “In that case, Kesi, I kill them.”<sup>43</sup> It can be argued whether this is literal or metaphorical killing, as colloquially crying out, “You’re dead to me,” is not meant to be understood as a medical statement about someone’s biological status. Still, within the sutras there are instances in both the *Mahaparinirvana Sutta* and the *Ambattha Sutta* where the Buddha is presented with a clear opportunity to explicitly censure military violence, but chooses not to do so, calling into question how categorical the injunctions against violence really are, especially in the political realm.<sup>44</sup> This idea that individual violence may not be permissible, but state-sanctioned violence may, if not smiled upon, at least be a necessary

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<sup>42</sup> Sujato, “Velamasutta (AN9.20),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://suttacentral.net/an9.20/en/sujato>.

<sup>43</sup> Sujato, “Kesisutta (AN4.111),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://suttacentral.net/an4.111/en/sujato>.

<sup>44</sup> Sujato, “Mahaparinibbanasutta (DN16),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://suttacentral.net/dn16/en/sujato>; Sujato, “Ambatthasutta (DN3),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://suttacentral.net/dn3/en/sujato>.

part of governance is again reinforced by the *Chakkravati Sutra* which discusses the duty of the ideal Buddhist “Wheel-Turning Monarch” as one who presides over a “court, troops, aristocrats, vassals” and does “not let injustice prevail in the realm.”<sup>45</sup> Here a kingdom which upholds military institutions and uses militaristic terms such as combating injustice are being spoken about with approval in the Buddha’s own worldview.

Condoning state-level violence is also hinted at in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. The *Lotus Sutra*, the *Sutra of Golden Light*, and the *Sutra of the Humane Kings* are often referred to as the “three sutras which protect the state,” protection which is linked with military violence as one facet of such protection.<sup>46</sup> The *Lotus Sutra* has war drums ringing out and Dharma Kings pledging their armies to the service of those who follow Buddhism.<sup>47</sup> They also describe the ideal Buddhist “Wheel-Turning King” who crush those who do not submit.<sup>48</sup> While the Buddha later shows that this is a simile for the Buddha providing the Dharma to those who fight against delusions, in no way does this description show military power and state sanctioned violence in anything but a positive, admirable light.

The *Sutra of Golden Light* continues this positive use of military imagery when it discusses heavenly armies lending aid when hostile human kings encroach upon the

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<sup>45</sup> Sujato, “Chakkavattisutta (DN26),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://suttacentral.net/dn26/en/sujato>.

<sup>46</sup> Jacqueline Stone, “Realizing This World as the Buddha Land,” in *Readings of the Lotus Sutra*, ed. Stephen Teiser and Jacqueline Stone (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 218.

<sup>47</sup> Gene Reeves, *Lotus Sutra*, 68, 98, 181, 199.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

kingdom, routing all enemies and adversaries from the land.<sup>49</sup> While this text is careful to place any actual violence in the hands of unseen beings rather than the humans themselves, the triumphal nature of battle is upheld. This text also holds a strong injunction for policing and maintaining civil order within the kingdom, “taming criminals according to their crimes” and “when his land is ravaged by rampant disorderly acts, he should quell these transgressions...and subdue the wicked and sinful in his realm.”<sup>50</sup> The *Sutra of the Humane Kings* continues with these motifs, presenting protection of the state through military metaphors and promising unseen armies to destroy all political adversaries and subdue hostile armies.<sup>51</sup> This sutra especially outlines several important considerations. The first is that it upholds the dominance of politics even above that of spiritual authority as the scripture is so great it is only provided to kings and not to monastics. This is done precisely because they hold the political power, and hence easily inferred methods of enforcing their political power, to establish and maintain Buddhism as a facet of the state. Second, as the sutra outlines a well-ordered kingdom, it lists social levels devoted entirely to political leaders and the military within its ideal social structure. This sutra also promises to grant rewards which match traditional political objectives of wealth, pleasure, and expanded political dominance, if the teachings of the sutra are honored within the kingdom. When violence is used to obtain political goals, any harm or killing is specifically cited as being morally legitimized and fully in keeping

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<sup>49</sup> *The King of Glorious Sutras called the Exalted Sublime Golden Light* (Portland: FPMT, 2011), 50-55.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture for Humane Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 260-271.

with all the teachings of the Buddha, overcoming the “four grave prohibitions.”<sup>52</sup> These four grave prohibitions, or *parajika*, were discussed above and are derived from the Theravada *Pratimoksha*, as simply a different way of talking about the precepts, with the first grave prohibition being identical to the First Precept – “no killing.”<sup>53</sup>

So far, many of the sutras discussed above have usually been careful in framing the military as either a metaphor for teaching or ensuring that any literal fighting is undertaken by heavenly beings. This appears to imply an internal tension in the authors of these texts between a personal desire and admiration for military structures and the glorification that often follows images of grand armies and physically perfected war heroes, balanced against an equal understanding of what the Buddha has most commonly taught about the dangers of violence and that the virtues of pacifism are ultimately correct. This discussion of how violence fits into the development of Buddhist scripture and Buddhist societies is worthy of its own dedicated research, however for this project there is only room to acknowledge that this relationship does in fact exist and can be seen developing through the history of Buddhist tradition.

There is one area where Buddhist scripture finally shifts from metaphor and inference and becomes a direct and specific sanction of violence which is unequivocally literal. This example comes from the *Upaya Kausalya* or *Skillful Means Sutra* and the story of the ship captain.<sup>54</sup> In this parable, a ship captain who is ferrying many people across the seas discovers that there is a murderer hiding among the passengers who is

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Blum, *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, vol.1, *The Nirvana Sutra* (Moraga: BDK America, 2013), 100, 347.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Tatz, *The Skill in Means Sutra* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2016), 73-74.

planning on killing everyone onboard. The ship captain, rather pointedly named “Great Compassion,” chooses to preemptively kill the murderer to save everyone else on the ship. The story concludes with the Buddha stating that he himself was that ship captain in a previous life.<sup>55</sup> The Buddha then states that while he still suffered the negative karmic implications for the murder, these were entirely mitigated by the positive karmic results of both the purity of his intention in protecting the other passengers, and in his selfless willingness to accept the karmic consequences of the killing due to his compassion for the lives of the passengers. This text drives home the point that the virtues of compassionate intention are so great that they override the negative karmic implications of killing.<sup>56</sup> This text shows perhaps the greatest example for the permissibility of killing, and raises a consideration that was historically noticed and incorporated in Buddhist societies, namely that intention and purpose behind killing are just as important considerations as killing in and of itself. This understanding of the potential nuance behind killing, the role of intention, and historical development and understanding of these considerations will be explored more fully in the following section. All of these canonical sources, while limited in number compared to the scriptures which prohibit violence, still demonstrate that there is familiarity and

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<sup>55</sup> Stories from the Buddha’s previous lives are called Jataka Tales, however this specific story appears to be a Mahayana invention as it does not appear in the Theravada canon, nor in the *Jatakavagga*, the primary Pali text of over 500 stories about the Buddha’s previous lives and deeds. The University of Edinburgh hosts a searchable database of Jataka stories based on all major Theravada texts containing Jataka tales, cataloguing over 800 stories. Database searches did reveal stories about ship captains, but none of them killed. University of Edinburgh, “Jataka Stories Database,” 2024, <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/>.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Jerryson, “Buddhist Traditions and Violence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 69.

occasional support for this aspect of the human condition across the major schools of Buddhism.

## **Support of Violence in Buddhist Societies**

With an overview of the scriptural legitimization for military violence, it is now important to explore how these canonical resources informed the development of religious orthopraxy in Buddhist cultures. This will provide the second half needed to understand the second major research question of this project, namely how modern Buddhist military chaplains understand their relationship to the First Precept. This will be done by exploring state-sanctioned violence committed in the real world by societies which fully identify as Buddhist. Michael Jerryson is perhaps the most prolific scholar on the union of Buddhism and violence. Although his research primarily focused on South Asia, he presented a crucial understanding of Buddhist violence in the face of Western consternation at the idea of peaceful Buddhists exacting violence in the real world.

Although Jerryson's specific research focuses on the modern era, his framework for understanding violence in general within Buddhist societies will be useful to outline here before embarking on a historical overview of Buddhist violence throughout the past. His argument is that of cultural authority. Cultural authority states that if a society holds Buddhist texts as their scriptural authority, follow time honored Buddhist traditions, and fully identify as Buddhists themselves, then what these societies do – including violence – is what Buddhism actually is, whether or not non-Buddhist societies or academics

recognize such actions as Buddhist.<sup>57</sup> This idea helps balance the notion that Buddhism somehow exists as a pure Platonic form, a form which Western scholars can use to deny the real-world Buddhists of their identity when it does not agree with the Westerner's constructed perceptions of what Buddhism "should be." The only way to establish what Buddhism is as a living tradition is to ask the Buddhists who are living it and then accept that what they do as real Buddhism – whether or not it agrees with outside academic or cultural preconceptions or stereotypes. With this understanding, the more specific forms of both individual and state-sanctioned violence within Buddhist societies can be explored.

One of the strongest references for sanctioning violence in Theravadan societies is the *Mahavamsa*, an epic poem similar to the *Odyssey* or the *Ramayana*, where a Buddhist king is told by a monastic that because the people he killed during war were not Buddhist, king did not actually kill any true human beings.<sup>58</sup> This text was developed after Ashoka, a unifying king in India during the third century CE, introduced Buddhism to the island of Sri Lanka, and who has often been upheld as the ideal non-violent ruler.<sup>59</sup> According to *Mahavamsa*, if a person is not Buddhist, they are not human. This poem has been used to justify Buddhist warfare in Sri Lanka starting from the second century CE.<sup>60</sup> Scholar David Kent has traced the use of this text in justifying violence through

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Jerryson, *If you Meet the Buddha on the Road: Buddhism Politics and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 182.

<sup>58</sup> Willhelm Geiger, *The Mahavamsa* (London: Pali Text Society, 1912), 178.

<sup>59</sup> P. D. Premasiri, "Implications of Buddhist Political Ethics for the Minimisation of Suffering in Situations of Armed Conflict," in *Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Andrew Bartles-Smith et al (New York: Routledge, 2023), 88.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Jerryson, *Buddhist Fury* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 123.

history up to the Sri Lankan civil war which ended in 2006.<sup>61</sup> Dr. Iselin Frydenlund has published frequently on the role that Buddhism plays as a major supporter and representative of the modern Sri Lankan military, with Buddhist rituals and symbols forming a significant facet of Sri Lankan military culture.<sup>62</sup> Her research has found that modern Sri Lankan Buddhists, both monastic and lay, echo the militarism and accompanying sanctioned violence of this upright *Mahavamsa* Buddhist ruler, and hence by extension use it to legitimize the military and military violence for Buddhist political power in a samsaric world.<sup>63</sup>

As mentioned previously, Michael Jerryson has extensively researched the modern relationship between the monastic community, the government, and the military, especially in Thailand.<sup>64</sup> This relationship is so close that soldiers are ordained as Buddhist monastics and then posted in Buddhist temples while retaining their military responsibilities and chain of command as their primary obligation.<sup>65</sup> In Tibet, Jens Schlieter has explored the regicide of King Langdarma by a Buddhist monk and how this event served as the foundation of “compassionate killing,” and has been cited as the primary event which allowed Buddhism to flourish in Tibet in the ninth century and has

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<sup>61</sup> Daniel Kent, “Onward Buddhist Soldiers. Preaching to the Sri Lankan Army,” in *Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57.

<sup>62</sup> Iselin Frydenlund, “‘Operation Dhamma’: The Sri Lankan Armed Forces as an Instrument of Buddhist Nationalism,” in *Military Chaplaincy in an Era of Religious Pluralism: Military – Religious Nexus of Asia, Europe, and USA*, ed. Torkel Brekke and Valadmir Tikhonov (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2106), 95.

<sup>63</sup> Iselin Frydenlund, “Buddhist Militarism Beyond Texts in Advance: The Importance of Ritual During the Sri Lankan Civil War,” *Journal of Religion and Violence* 5, no. 1 (2017): 30.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Jerryson, “Militarizing Buddhism: Violence in Southern Thailand,” in *Buddhist Warfare*, ed. Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 182.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

been considered a very auspicious event.<sup>66</sup> This idea was later suppressed by subsequent Tibetan leaders, but as David Kopel points out in his overview of historical Buddhist militarism in Asia, Buddhism was used as a rationale for continued violence in both Tibet and China throughout their dynastic histories.<sup>67</sup> In the *Sutra of the Humane Kings*, discussed above, ritual practices are taught and were historically implemented which were used to literally herald in the unseen beings who would protect the state.<sup>68</sup> Scholar Yuan Haowen outlines devotional practices to the Bodhisattva Marici which were used to bless and reinforce the military in Yuan Dynasty China during the late thirteenth century.<sup>69</sup> George Tanabe and Jacqueline Stone have also outline militaristic rituals which were developed to make political use of the *Lotus Sutra* for military protection as well as the construction of networks of “Temples to Protect the State” in Japan.<sup>70</sup> These practices of legitimizing state violence were used all the way up to the modern era where Chinese Buddhists monastics overwhelmingly agreed that “compassionate killing” and armed military service by monastics was justified and fully keeping in line with Buddhist teachings during the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930’s.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jens Schlieter, “Compassionate Killing or Conflict Resolution? The Murder of King Langdarma According to Tibetan Buddhist Sources,” in *Buddhism and Violence*, ed. Michael Zimmerman (Bhairahawa: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006), 133.

<sup>67</sup> David Kopel, “Self Defense in Asian Religions,” *Liberty University Law Review* 1, no. 1 (2009): 131, 133.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-209.

<sup>69</sup> Haowen Yuan, *Xu Yijianzhi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuji, 1986), 2.26.

<sup>70</sup> George Tanabe Jr. and Tanaka Chigaku, “The Lotus Sutra and the Body Politic.” in *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, ed. George Tanabe Jr. and Willa Tanabe (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 204; Stone, “Realizing This World,” 218.

<sup>71</sup> Kopel, “Self Defense,” 133.

Within this same region, Samuel Hawley, in perhaps the most comprehensive overview of the Imjin War currently available, explored how militaristic Buddhism was credited with helping Korea defeat the Japanese invasion of 1592-1598 CE.<sup>72</sup> Korean Buddhists, who had been culturally suppressed in the Korean peninsula due to social and political pressure from the Neo-Confucianist Joseon Empire since the 1300's, found that in joining the war against the Japanese they would be in a position to prove their patriotism and support of the government, and hopefully be rewarded with greater social acceptance and less future persecution. Samuel Kim also explored this trend and pointed out how these Korean monastics appealed to Neo-Confucian ideas of statehood on the one hand and the threat of the extinction of Buddhism on the other as justifications for monastics to take up arms and directly engage in warfare.<sup>73</sup>

Mikael Adolphson traced this tendency in Japan, showing how warrior tradition and Buddhism influenced each other greatly in the medieval period of 1100 CE with monastics often carrying weapons and fighting both among each other and directly against the Japanese state.<sup>74</sup> Christopher Kleine and Mark Unno also studied this period, exploring how these violent actions were often carried out against the backdrop of the Buddhist understanding of the Dharma-Ending Age, a time of moral degeneration when the true teachings of Buddhism would disappear from the world.<sup>75</sup> Only through

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<sup>72</sup> S. Hawley, *The Imjin War: Japan's Sixteenth Century Invasion of Korea and Attempt to Conquer China* (Seoul: Conquistador Press, 2014), 278-279.

<sup>73</sup> Samuel Dukhae Kim, "The Korean Monk-Soldiers in the Imjin Wars: An Analysis of Buddhist Resistance to the Hideyoshi Invasion, 1592-1598." PhD diss. (Columbia University, 1978), 25-26.

<sup>74</sup> Mikael Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws of Buddha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 30.

<sup>75</sup> Christopher Kleine, "Evil Monks with Good Intentions?" in *Buddhism and Violence*, ed. Michael Zimmerman (Bhairahawa: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006), 74.

concerted effort, often backed by military force, could the Buddha's teachings be preserved.<sup>76</sup> George Samson pointed how the violence between different Buddhist sects continued over several centuries, greatly contributing to the turmoil and bloodshed of tenth century Japan and continued on for the next several centuries.<sup>77</sup> These conflicts often resulted in full-fledged wars between the monastics of different sects, each of whom raised their own armies, such as the Lotus War of Temmon in 1534, between the Nichiren and Jodo-Shin sects, resulting in many temples and cities being conquered, pillaged, and burned.<sup>78</sup> Brian Victoria is probably one of the best known scholars of modern Buddhist violence in Japan. In his now famous work *Zen at War*, he outlines how Buddhist militarism continued up through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrating how the Buddhist teachings of monastic figures such as Sawaki Kodo were applied to support Imperial Japanese aggression during World War II, while at the same time Japanese Buddhist institutions such as Soto Shu (Zen) were openly supporting wartime violence.<sup>79</sup> Violence was legitimized with arguments about how absolute understandings of emptiness and the complete selfless nature of all things meant that if there was no self then during war there was neither killing or being killed, and hence no blame, guilt, or violation of the precepts, just as long as the killing was done with the pure intention of upholding and protecting the state.<sup>80</sup> Japanese Buddhist traditions also used arguments

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<sup>76</sup> Mark Unno, "The Body of Time and Discourse of the Precepts," in *Discourse and Ideology in Medieval Japanese Buddhism*, ed. Richard Payne and Taigen Dan Leighton (New York: Routledge, 2006), 127.

<sup>77</sup> George Samson, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 223.

<sup>78</sup> Kazuo Kasahara, *A History of Japanese Religion* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 2004), 282-282.

<sup>79</sup> Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2006), 36, 133.

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Ives, *Imperial Way Zen: Ichikawa Hakugen's Critique and Lingering Questions for Buddhist Ethics* (New York: University of Hawaii Press), 35.

that war was the result of the negative karma of others thus justifying their aggression.<sup>81</sup> These arguments all referenced many of the scriptures already discussed above such as the *Upaya Kausalya Sutra* which gives permission for direct killing as long as it is based on compassion and the intention of protection for others or minimizing later harm.<sup>82</sup> The legacy of these wartime acts have been transplanted into American Buddhist communities which continue to process how to understand this troublesome aspect of their now adopted tradition.<sup>83</sup>

While it may be both easy and comfortable to mentally separate Western ideas of Buddhism with an equally clear understanding of the numerous wars, upheavals, and bloodshed which has taken place throughout Buddhist-dominated societies, these two facets of human culture were never separated. Buddhist practitioners and thinkers have continued to engage with political and military goals from the time of the Buddha himself into the modern age.

## **Buddhists in the United States Military**

The overview of both the scriptural and cultural developments that have joined to form the union of Buddhist tradition and military institutions can now provide a foundation for exploring the third major question of this project, namely how do the Buddhist chaplains who serve in the US Armed Forces understand their own

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<sup>81</sup> Brian Victoria, “Karma, War and Inequality in Twentieth Century Japan,” *The Asian-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 5, no. 5 (May 2, 2007): 4.

<sup>82</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, 124, 300.

<sup>83</sup> R. A. Peterson, “Experiments in Mindfulness,” in *Refuge in the Storm*, ed. Nathan Jishin Michon (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2023), 189.

responsibility towards the violence committed by their institution. To being understanding this question, the history of Buddhist service members in the US Armed Forces will be presented.

It is not known who or when the first Buddhists joined the United States military. The first documented Buddhist religious service was performed in 1944 for 50 members of the mostly segregated 442<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment which was comprised almost entirely of American soldiers of Japanese descent.<sup>84</sup> It is interesting to note that this regiment, which held the majority of all Buddhist service members in the United States Armed Forces at the time, went on to become the most decorated regiment ever in US military history.<sup>85</sup> It was not until after World War II that Buddhism became an available religious option for US Army dog tags.<sup>86</sup> *Chapter 4: Data Results* will further show this information may not be common knowledge to every military recruiter even today.

Public religious demographics for the US Armed Forces are difficult to obtain. In 2009, upon the opening of the first dedicated Buddhist chapel in the United States military at the United States Air Force Academy, NPR reported that of the 1.4 million service members in the US, only 5,287 of these identified as Buddhists, and at this time there were no Buddhist military chaplains.<sup>87</sup> Over the next ten years, the number of

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<sup>84</sup> James McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service During World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2007), 304.

<sup>85</sup> Kathryn Shenkle, "Patriots Under Fire: Japanese Americans in World War II," Center of Military History, June 23, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080603013012/http://www.history.army.mil/html/topics/apam/patriots.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Duncan Williams, *Issei Buddhism in the Americas* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>87</sup> Jeff Brady, "Military Buddhist Chapel Represents Tolerance," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, October 13, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/2009/10/13/113501618/military-buddhist-chapel-represents-tolerance>.

identified Buddhist service members appeared to grow along with the overall size of the US military. In 2019, the US Congress released its new edition of the periodically published report, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services: Background and Issues for Congress*, which provides the most specific demographic information publicly available about religious representation in the US military. This document states that fewer than 1% of service members identify as Buddhist.<sup>88</sup> With roughly 2 million service members across all branches, both active and reserve, this accounts for no more than 20,000 self-identified Buddhist military personnel in the United States Armed Forces.<sup>89</sup>

While still a minority, the present of Buddhism in the United States military has led to some concern from scholars as voiced in their published research. For example, Brian Victoria has continued his critique his works on Buddhist militarism, noting similarities between the Imperial Japanese use of Buddhism to promote military aggression during World War II and the United States new trajectory with Buddhist chaplains, citing the same concerns about the erosion of Buddhism's ultimate message of liberation from a samsaric world and replacing it with a glorified subservience to the state and a legitimization of nationalistic priorities.<sup>90</sup> This critique might appear legitimized as some scholars, such as Noel Trew, have advocated for the use of Buddhist methods by

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<sup>88</sup> Kristy Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (2019), 46-47.

<sup>89</sup> Rosa Delauro, "Appropriations Committee Releases Fiscal Year 2022 Defense Funding Bill", *U.S. House Appropriations*, accessed June 29, 2024, <https://appropriations.house.gov/news/press-releases/appropriations-committee-releases-fiscal-year-2022-defense-funding-bill>.

<sup>90</sup> Brian Victoria, "The Emperor's New Clothes: The Buddhist Military Chaplaincy in Imperial Japan and Contemporary America," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, 11 (2016): 190, 188.

the US military to wage war more effectively from the very Buddhist sects critiqued by Victoria.<sup>91</sup> Other voices that have become more vocal in their support or at least acknowledgement of Buddhism's engagement with state-sponsored violence as well. These include Daniel Ratheiser and Sunil Jariyakarawana who have stated that the sutras, the lived tradition of Buddhist societies, and notable Buddhist monastics such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Ajahn Brahmavamso have all pointed out that with careful application being a soldier can constitute a form of "Right Livelihood."<sup>92</sup> Thomas Dyer is one of the few authors who published while serving as a US Buddhist military chaplain, and his work frames Buddhist chaplains as "warrior-protectors" following an ethic bound by utilitarianism, and the value of overall reduction of harm for all beings.<sup>93</sup> Robert Bosco, another researcher of Buddhists in the American military, would acknowledge that the militant history of Asian warrior-monks can be heard in Dyer's words, but life as a monk in a militarized monastery carries fewer and fewer modern equivalencies with how the American military functions, thus requiring new understandings of the role of chaplain.<sup>94</sup> Paul Robinson noted this common Buddhist position of minimizing harm, but also noticed a recent shift in Buddhist understanding about military action towards compassion to both those harmed and towards those

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<sup>91</sup> Noel Trew, "Not Knowing is Most Intimate': Koan Practice and the Fog of War," in *Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Andrew Bartles-Smith et al (New York: Routledge, 2023), 229.

<sup>92</sup> Daniel Ratheiser and Sunil Kariyakarawana, "The Paradox of the Buddhist Soldier," in *Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Andrew Bartles-Smith et al (New York: Routledge, 2023), 120-122.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Dryer, "Buddhist Pastoral Ministry in the Military," in *The Arts of Contemplative Care: Pioneering Voices in Buddhist Chaplaincy and Pastoral Work*, ed. Cheryl A. Giles and Willa B. Miller (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 204; Jerryson, *Buddha on the Road*, 112.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Bosco, "Battlefield Dharma: American Buddhists in American Wars," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 21 (2014): 843.

committing the harm.<sup>95</sup> A colloquial interpretation of Elizabeth Harris's research into Buddhism and warfare could be that regardless of Buddhism's hopes or even best efforts, war is a reality which cannot be ignored, and Buddhists must find a way to engage with it as it will engage with them whether they like it or not.<sup>96</sup> While modern research continues to mount in regards to how Buddhism has or should engage with violence, warfare, and the profession of being a soldier, there appeared to be very few resources which were based on direct interactions with US Buddhist service members themselves.

## **Religious Freedom and Military Chaplaincy in the United States**

The concurrent development of religious freedom in the United States and how these freedoms are represented in the armed forces necessarily impacts how Buddhist chaplains operate and conceive of their military service. The role of religious freedom and the regulatory apparatus of military chaplaincy can therefore form a facet of understanding how chaplains might conceive of their relationship and support of military violence, which is the third primary focus on this project.

Documentation surrounding what constitutes a military chaplain in the United States and the requirements of achieving this position are clearly laid out and readily available. However, an overview of what constitutes chaplaincy in general for the United States military will help contextualize both this research as well as the other literature that

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<sup>95</sup> Peter Harvey, "Buddhist Motivation to Support IHL, From Concern to Minimise Harms Inflicted by Military Action to Both Those Who Suffer Them and Those Who Inflict Them," in *Buddhism and International Humanitarian Law*, ed. Andrew Bartles-Smith et al (New York: Routledge, 2023), 64.

<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Harris, "Buddhist Empirical Realism and the Conduct of Armed Conflict," *Contemporary Buddhism* 22, no. 1-2 (2021): 148.

has explored topics relating to this issue. When the United States was founded, the colony of Rhode Island was the final signatory to the American Constitution. Its hesitancy in signing the Constitution focused on whether the United States would follow the monarchies of Europe and ensconce a formal state religion to match the colonies now unified political structure. Rhode Island was founded on the premise of the individual's right to practice any, all, or no religious tradition at all. Only when George Washington offered his solemn promise that freedom of religion would be included in an immediate amendment to the Constitution did Rhode Island finally agree to sign the newly established Constitution of the United States of America. True to his word, George Washington immediately drafted the First Amendment of the Constitution which solidified the right to freedom of religion in the United States.<sup>97</sup>

The First Amendment allows all Americans to practice their religion of choice without interference from the government. Military service members do not forfeit their citizenship or constitutional rights when joining the United States military, and therefore this requires the military institutions of the United States to continue to allow the free practice of religion among its service members.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, military service itself is its own type of religious interference given the demands of disparate, often isolated or international military postings, continual changes in duty stations, and the restrictions on access to and from military installations. These factors all impede service members from practicing forms of religion which require the presence of religious professionals, such as

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<sup>97</sup> U.S. Constitution, amend. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Religious Liberty in the Military Services*, DoDI 1300.17 (Department of Defense, September 1, 2020), 4, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/130017p.pdf>.

priests or ministers. To lessen the impact of these types of structural impediments from restricting the free practice of religion within the military, religious professionals from all established religions are recruited to serve as military chaplains in order to uphold the right of religious freedom and to meet the spiritual needs of service members. The original injunction provided by the Federal Government to provide chaplains for the military is outlined in United States Code Title 10.<sup>99</sup> Title 10 presents broad guidelines for the establishment of chaplains within the United States military which are further articulated by additional instructions from the Department of Defense, most specifically DoD Instruction No. 1304.28, *The Appointment and Service of Chaplains*.<sup>100</sup>

To prevent the United States government from showing preferential treatment to a specific religion, *The Appointment and Service of Chaplains* states that the only religious requirement (as opposed to educational or work experience) to become a military chaplain is religious endorsement.<sup>101</sup> Religious endorsement is when a religious organization vouches for a candidate's suitability to provide for the religious and spiritual needs of the members of their own religious tradition. Again, to prevent the government from showing preferential treatment to any religious organization, the only major requirement to be recognized as an endorsing agency is to be registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a non-profit 501(3)(c) religious organization. The Department of

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<sup>99</sup> 10 U.S.C. – Each branch of the military is listed under separate subsections under Title 10. Within the subsections for Army, Navy, and Airforce, there are virtually identical subsections under Part II Personnel establishing chaplains within each branch. The Navy provides chaplains for the Marine Corp and the Coast Guard.

<sup>100</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *The Appointment and Service of Chaplains*, DoDI 1304.28 (Department of Defense, May 8, 2024), 12-13, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/130428p.pdf>.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Defense does not make any restrictions on the spiritual beliefs or practices of such organizations. Once a religious organization is registered as a non-profit 502(3)(c) organization and has registered itself with the Department of Defense, it may endorse chaplains for military service. All other religion-specific requirements to serve as a chaplain, such as ordination or authorization to provide sacraments or rituals, is left to the purview of each individual endorsing organization, not the United States military. Once commissioned, chaplains are allowed to facilitate the practice of their particular religion among their military congregation “according to the manner and form” of their own specific religion.<sup>102</sup> Chaplains are also required to facilitate the practice of religion for those outside of their own religious tradition, either through providing space to hold services, appointing and managing lay leaders (active-duty military personnel who are not commissioned as chaplains, but are ordained by their faith tradition to provide religious/sacramental services), or overseeing civilian religious volunteers.<sup>103</sup> All of the duties of a chaplain are to ensure “spiritual readiness” within the unit and to advise the command on “religion’s impact on military operations.”<sup>104</sup> One privilege found among military chaplains which is not present among most other helping professions is an ironclad rule on confidentiality. Nothing said to a military chaplain can ever be disclosed under any circumstance and regardless of content.<sup>105</sup> Even if a service member were to

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<sup>102</sup> 10 U.S.C. §8221.

<sup>103</sup> Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, *Religious Lay Leaders*, NTTP 1.05.1M (Washington, D. C.: Department of the Navy, May 2016), 1-1, <https://www.marines.mil/portals/1/Publications/MCRP%206-12.pdf>.

<sup>104</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Appointment and Service*, 3-2.

<sup>105</sup> Joint Service Committee on Military Justice, “Military Rules of Evidence,” in *Manual for Courts-Martial United States* (Department of Defense, 2024), III-23, III-24.

disclose both having committed and planning on immediately committing any type of heinous crime or terrorist activity, a military chaplain under no circumstances can reveal what has been said. Chaplains can, however, reveal communications upon receiving consent from the individual. A final understanding of military chaplains is that they are not allowed to carry arms, or make any combat decisions at any level, either strategic, tactical, or personal.<sup>106</sup>

This framework would supposedly create a situation where all religious traditions are equally respected, however a certain twist in interpretation has led to some unexpected results. To prevent religious discrimination, chaplains are allowed to practice according to the manner and form of their parent tradition. One interpretation of this is to believe that as all religious traditions must be respected under the above federal laws, that a chaplain cannot defame or discriminate against any other tradition. Given the original formulation of religious freedom in the United States, it can be argued that this was the founder's intent. However, this has become twisted by the assertion that within a given religious tradition, if proselytization and condemnation of anything outside of the tradition is an integral part of the religion itself, then federal law, which must protect freedom of religion, must therefore ensure and protect under federal regulation the right of a chaplain representing that religion to condemn and discriminate against others in any way they might choose.<sup>107</sup> In this way "freedom of religion" becomes the tool of

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<sup>106</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 1-05 (Department of Defense, 2013), 1-2.

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Tilghman, "Chaplain Faces Possible Discharge for Being 'Intolerant,'" *Military Times*, March 11, 2015, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2015/03/10/chaplain-faces-possible-discharge-for-being-intolerant/>.

repressing and silencing any form of religious diversity, while specifically protecting bigotry, discrimination, and hatred, towards any class, be it religious, racial, or gender, of an individual. This is not just an intellectual exercise, as this interpretation of federal regulation has been successfully argued and upheld in military court.<sup>108</sup>

### **Buddhist Chaplains in the United States Military**

As outlined above, while Buddhists have been serving in the United States military since at least World War II, Buddhist chaplains have not been present in the armed forces until relatively recently. During World War II the Department of Defense had recognized the existence of Buddhist service member, but fearing the public perception of being “un-American,” the DoD intentionally assigned only Christian chaplains to units comprised of Buddhist troops.<sup>109</sup> As mentioned above, only after World War II were military service members able to have Buddhism as their religious demarcation on their dog tags. It was not until 1990 that the Department of Defense created the Chaplain Corps religious insignia which all chaplains wear to identify their faith tradition for Buddhism, based off the Dharmachakra, the eight-pointed wheel of the Dharma, though it would be another 14 years until the first Buddhist chaplain was commissioned.<sup>110</sup> The first United States Buddhist military chaplain was finally recruited

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<sup>108</sup> First Liberty, “Chaplain Modder Case,” accessed August 24, 2025, <https://firstliberty.org/cases/chaplainmodder>.

<sup>109</sup> Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 271.

<sup>110</sup> *Encyclopedia of the United States Army Insignia and Uniforms* (1996), s.v. “Chaplains.”

and fully commissioned in 2004 in the United States Navy.<sup>111</sup> The process of recognizing Buddhism as a religious tradition in the United States continued its slow integration with the Navy waiting another 18 years in 2022 to fly the first Buddhist prayer flag during Buddhist religious services at sea.<sup>112</sup> The flying of the Buddhist flag is in accordance with Navy regulations established in 1962 that state the prayer flag of the officiating religious tradition must be flown above the national ensign at sea during religious services.<sup>113</sup>

While, as mentioned above, there are no publicly available comprehensive record of all chaplains and their religious affiliations in the US military, the Department of Defense provides public records of all authorized religious endorsing bodies in their document “Endorsing Organizations/Agents,” which shows that all Buddhist chaplains are endorsed by a single endorser. The Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) from the Jodo Shinshu tradition of Pure Land Buddhism is currently the only authorized Department of Defense endorsing religious organization for Buddhist chaplains.<sup>114</sup> As the only officially recognized endorser for military chaplaincy, the BCA has been placed in the awkward position of endorsing all Buddhist chaplains from all Buddhist traditions,

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<sup>111</sup> Henrick Dickson, “U.S. Navy Commissions Military’s First Buddhist Chaplain,” Navy News Service, Story Number NNS040723-10, July 13, 2004, <https://thechaplainkit.com/history/navy-chaplaincy/navy-chaplaincy/first-buddhist-chaplain/>.

<sup>112</sup> Johnathan Lehrfeld, “Navy Flies Buddhist Flag Aboard Ship for First Time,” *Navy Times*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2022/09/15/navy-flies-buddhist-flag-aboard-ship-for-first-time/>.

<sup>113</sup> Navy Telecommunications Command, *Naval Telecommunications Procedures: Flags Pennants and Customs*, NTP-13B (Washington, D. C.: Department of the Navy, August 1986), 17-10.

<sup>114</sup> Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, “Endorsing Organizations/Agents” (Department of Defense), accessed November 26, 2024, <https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/MPP/AFCB/Endorsements/>.

with the added tension that through this research project, no currently serving military chaplains that were identified, whether or not they responded to interview requests, were ordained within the BCA tradition.<sup>115</sup> This has left the BCA needing to manage and provide oversight and support for a group of chaplains, none of whom actually belong to or represent the BCA's own denomination. Potential reasons that other Buddhist organizations have not formed their own endorsing bodies may be a lack of willingness to provide official sanction for military chaplains due to ethical reasons, a lack of understanding about the requirements to become an endorser, or the difficulties in establishing a final authority within a given Buddhist community over who can serve as the formal endorsing official who is often viewed synonymously as the head of the religious tradition by the Department of Defense.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the priorities of Buddhist organizations may be that they are fully focused on the maintenance and welfare of their own temple communities, or simply lack familiarity with the endorsing process since most people regardless of profession have an understanding of what a monk, priest, minister, or pastor is, but very few people have likely encountered religious

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<sup>115</sup> While still focused on military chaplaincy, I was also endorsed by the BCA. During my interview I was specifically told that the BCA wishes that other Buddhist organizations would establish themselves as endorsers as they were becoming tired spending most of their time managing chaplains who they did not really know and who did not represent their own specific faith tradition. Despite this weariness, I am unaware of anyone being refused endorsement by the BCA who met all standardized requirements for endorsement.

<sup>116</sup> The endorsing and chaplaincy requirements for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) are virtually identical to those in the Department of the Defense, however since the VA is separate from the DoD, religious organizations must be registered as endorsers with both departments. The BCA was until recently also the only VA endorsing body, until I personally formed the second Buddhist endorsing body for VA chaplaincy. During this process there were long discussions of who should be authorized to endorse VA chaplains, the head of my own temple, the head of our sect in the United States, or the head of the sect overall in Japan. Each person felt it was inappropriate to be the endorsing official since they each answered to someone higher, except the Zenji in Japan who had no context for this discussion. While we were ultimately able to resolve this issue and become an endorsing body, it highlighted some of the challenges which I have heard mentioned by others in their failed attempts to become endorsing organizations.

endorsement outside of chaplaincy circles. While all of these are plausible reasons, no formally published research was discovered which could speak to any of these propositions. How and why Buddhist traditions in the United States make decisions regarding DoD endorsement is one area of future research which this project has already highlighted as a potential area of exploration.

Returning specifically to the BCA, the organization does not publicly release information about its endorsed chaplains, but through my own best estimates as a Buddhist chaplain candidate in the United States Navy and former active duty service member, there are likely less than 10 currently serving Buddhist chaplains in the United States Armed Forces, with perhaps another 15 retired or separated Buddhist chaplains. As mentioned earlier, with at most 20,000 Buddhist service members across all branches of the US military, this means that there is one Buddhist chaplain for every 2000 Buddhist service members. With more than 2 million members of the US Armed Forces in both active and reserve components overall, and the total number of Buddhist chaplains operating in both components, it is therefore statistically probably that most Buddhist service members have never encountered a Buddhist chaplain, and that most Buddhist chaplains serve primarily non-Buddhist service members.<sup>117</sup> This both eases and complicates spiritual care, as the question, at least for the chaplains, becomes less of how to support weapon-bearing Buddhists in the US military and shifts to the question of how to introduce and educate non-Buddhists in Buddhist moral frameworks and decision-

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<sup>117</sup> I never encountered a Buddhist chaplain during my active-duty service. Some commands do not even have dedicated chaplains whatsoever. When I served in the Navy, chaplains were only assigned to aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships. In our task group there were 5 other ships, none of which carried dedicated chaplains.

making.<sup>118</sup> Despite these low numbers, DoD Instruction 1300.17 *Religious Liberty in the Military Service* expresses a push in recent years to increase religious diversity in the armed services.<sup>119</sup> This makes the ethical considerations of Buddhist chaplaincy more pertinent now than at any point prior in US history.

One final area of note within the history of Buddhist chaplains in the United States is the overarching theme of race. Many Asian scholars, such as Funie Hsu have pointed out that race and religion are closely intertwined, and that those with racial power, in this situation white nationalists, often attempt to come to the forefront of religious power, even for Asian religions like Buddhism.<sup>120</sup> The result is a sidelining and erasure of the Asian people and cultures from which the Buddha and Buddhism developed as the spiritual tradition spreads within the United States. This is already being experienced by many larger Buddhist organizations which are predominately white, such as the Soto Zen Buddhist Association.<sup>121</sup> While this troubling process of Asian erasure and white dominance of religious traditions is being witnessed in the civilian sector, this has not yet become the case for Buddhist chaplains in their relationship to Buddhism in the military. While confronted with the same limitations of determining total Buddhist chaplain populations, of the posited 25-30 Buddhist chaplains who have ever existed, the single most comprehensive source of publicly available

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<sup>118</sup> R. A. Peterson, "Military Chaplaincy" in *Studies on Humanistic Buddhism*, 5 (2023): 269.

<sup>119</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Religious Liberty*, 2.

<sup>120</sup> Funie Hsu, "Engaged Buddhism in the United States," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism*, ed. Ann Gleig and Scott A Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 366.

<sup>121</sup> Ann Gleig, "The #BuddhistCultureWars: BuddhaBros, Alt-Right Dharma, and Snowflake Sanghas," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 22 (2021): 20.

information about Buddhist chaplains is the seldom updated website [www.MaintaintheMind.com](http://www.MaintaintheMind.com). Further discussion on current numbers of Buddhist chaplains will be outlined in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, but of the chaplains listed on this website coupled with information from other cited sources such as the military news articles discussed above, it appears that perhaps roughly 80% of all Buddhist chaplains in the United States, past and present, have been of Asian descent.<sup>122</sup> Despite this bulwark, While scholars such as Patrick Wolfe have shown that the juggernaut of white Christian nationalism continues to be a constant companion in most, if not all, areas of American culture, Buddhist chaplains remain in a unique position to shape what Buddhist military chaplaincy may look like as it continues to develop, however how this opportunity will be used remains to be seen.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Maintain The Mind, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://maintainthemind.com/buddhism/buddhist-chaplains.html>. Even though there is no demographic information on the website, these numbers are based on the assumption that named chaplains such as “Jared Anderson” are not Asian, while those such as “Saejeong Kim” are of Asian descent. While this assumption is problematic, given the limits of publicly available records and the limited responses received for participation in this project, it can hint at very rough outlines of demographic trends within Buddhist military chaplain circles to date. Of the 28 total chaplains I have been able to identify from this website and from other personal and published materials, past and present, 22 appear to be of Asian descent and 6, including myself as a former Chaplain Candidate, appear to be non-Asian, and most likely Caucasian.

<sup>123</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settle Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 390; This is not to assume that the role and function of white Christian nationalism is not at work in the military as a whole. When I attended Chaplain Candidate Indoctrination Course for Navy Chaplaincy at Officer Training Command, Newport RI in 2019, one Navy Chaplain approached me and apologized for their perception and regret when they and their chaplain colleagues harassed and essentially drove Chaplain Shin, the first Buddhist chaplain in the US military, to resign her commission. I have no way of knowing if this statement is true, all I know is that it was said to me. However, it would explain why, in 2019, a colleague at the Marine base at Camp Pendleton, CA, told me they knew Chaplain Shin personally and while they would not provide me with her number, they would call her and ask that she speak to me. My colleague made that call in my presence, but I never received word from Chaplain Shin. In 2024 another similar situation arose with the same result. Given Chaplain Shin’s virtual disappearance from the public sphere after her time in the US Navy, one possible interpretation is her time in the Navy was not an entirely life-giving experience.

This ethnic makeup also carries with it the potential for greater harm in and of itself. While no dedicated statistics were discovered in this review, several studies, when taken in relationship, appear to point to greater levels of PTSD and other mental health concerns for Asian service members than is usually acknowledged. Initial studies appear to indicate that Asians actually have a lower rate of PTSD than other minority groups.<sup>124</sup> However these studies tend to base their determinations on rates of help-seeking behavior as the primary means of establishing the presence of mental health concerns.

Krishnamurti, et al, established that Asian veterans are significantly averse from seeking help for mental health conditions due to multiple factors, from Asians being viewed as a “model minority,” to mental health stigma within Asian communities reinforced by military culture which distains weakness.<sup>125</sup> Despite this aversion to seeking help, the rate of suicidal ideation among Asian veterans has risen an astonishingly 192% between 2001 and 2021, and is the highest rate of increase across all ethnic groups.<sup>126</sup> While it is encouraging that more people are seeking help, taken together, these studies point to the likelihood that Asian service members carry a larger mental health burden than is commonly acknowledged. As will be discussed in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, a significant portion of Buddhist chaplains are of Asian descent, and hence part of this community

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<sup>124</sup> A. L. Roberts, S. E. Gilman, J. Breslau, and K. C. Koenen, “Race/Ethnic Difference in Exposure to Traumatic Events, Development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Treatment-Seeking for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the United States,” *Psychological Medicine* 41, no. 1 (January 2011): 74.

<sup>125</sup> L. S. Krishnamurti, J. Mignogna, C. D. Iglesias, C. M. Rohs, E. R. Polzer, R. Holliday, G. Y. Iwamasa, and L. L. Monteith, “‘We don’t talk about these things’: Asian American Veterans’ Lived Experiences and Perspectives of Suicide Risk and Prevention,” *Frontier Psychiatry* 16 (June 2, 2025): 2-3.

<sup>126</sup> L. S. Krishnamurti, L. L. Monteith, A. Z. Agha, S. Chhatre, C. A. Hoffmire, and M. E. Dichter, “Veterans Crisis Line Use Among Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Veterans: Contact Reasons and Risk Assessment, by Gender,” *Psychological Services* (August 4, 2025), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12327761/>.

which bears significant amounts of mental health stress within the military due to their ethnicity. The role that military pressure takes in ethical decision making will be discussed in the following section, and it should be noted here that it may be exacerbated by the ethnic dimensions of mental health stress endured in the military for chaplains of Asian descent.

The above sections of this literature review demonstrate that the relationship between Buddhism and state-sanctioned violence is not new, and within the United States this relationship has continued, from World War II through 2004 when the US Navy commissioned the first Buddhist chaplain in the Department of Defense, and onward.<sup>127</sup> This number rose slowly, with only three active duty Buddhist chaplains in 2017, and a total of eight other Buddhists commissioned as chaplains across all branches by 2018.<sup>128</sup> It should be noted, however, that there is no record of how many Buddhist chaplains may have resigned their commissions throughout this time, making these numbers unreliable for total census.

## **Challenges and Ethical Tensions in Military Chaplain Service**

The final area of research in this project is an exploration of how chaplains deal with the ethical tensions of upholding both the First Precept and their military service at the same time. These challenges may not always appear immediately as a clear-cut moral decision but instead can develop through the manifold pressures and challenges that

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<sup>127</sup> Dickson, "U.S. Navy Commissions."

<sup>128</sup> Carola Roloff, "Buddhist Chaplaincy and Care Practices," in *Complexities of Spiritual Care in Plural Societies*, ed. Anne Grung (Boston: Walter De Gruyter GmbH, 2023), 85; Jerryson, *Buddha on the Road*, 111.

surround all service members, chaplain or otherwise. This section will first explore some of the ethical considerations facing chaplaincy in general before moving on to other types of challenges which might impact ethical decision making when serving in uniform.

There are several historical points of ethical tensions which other religious traditions have encountered in the realm of military chaplaincy which may also appear in the experiences of Buddhist military chaplains. Many of these tensions were already discussed in the first section of this chapter, and reappear here since the reason this project focuses exclusively on the Buddhist military chaplains' understandings of military is precisely because this baseline is needed to begin addressing some of the ethical tensions that are described here. As discussed above, Paul Robinson has explored how a chaplain's religious tradition can both helped and hinder the chaplain's moral engagement in military actions and the overall ethical training and outlook of any given military.<sup>129</sup> Military chaplains have found themselves either unintentionally or deliberately persuaded that they embody a moral legitimacy above and beyond that of civilians, either within their tradition or those serving as their government leaders.<sup>130</sup> This assumed difference and superiority to others is then used to legitimize what would normally be considered unethical actions, such as torturing civilians for military information.<sup>131</sup> Even outside of a dedicated discussion on religion and ethics, internal reviews conducted by military organizations have demonstrated that overall military culture and the pressures of military service with an emphasis on mission-

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<sup>129</sup> Robinson, *Tragedy of Democracy*, 28.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 25; Carlson, "Cashing Religion's Currency," 59.

accomplishment have a direct and deleterious impact on ethical action by service members.

Even for chaplains who are genuinely attempting to minimize the harm caused by military actions for all parties, Martin Cook and Henrik Syse have explored the tension that exists between one's religious convictions and military mission goals. This can place chaplains in a dual relationship especially if the chaplain's religious convictions are at odds with military mission objectives.<sup>132</sup> These dual relationships can be exacerbated since military decision-making and the standards that are used to determine if a given military action is ethical is based on legality and historical precedence as opposed to assumed universal moral truths which form the foundation of most religious belief systems.<sup>133</sup> This can also be impacted by the role of emotion and intuition in ethical decision making as outlined by such scholars as Johnathan Haidt, who demonstrated that emotion, such as feelings of patriotism, can sway someone's ethical decision making with or without a pre-established moral framework.<sup>134</sup>

Most research literature on moral injury has focused on the military chaplain as a source of healing for other service members, rather than as a potential victim, but when chaplains attempt to operate in situations where military and spiritual values are in deep tension, the conflicting loyalties can lead to moral distress within chaplains.<sup>135</sup> Military training emphasizes that the purpose of having military chaplains is to ensure mission

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<sup>132</sup> Cook, "What Should We Mean," 99.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>134</sup> Johnathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 159.

<sup>135</sup> Edward Tick, "Military Service, Moral Injury, and Spiritual Wounding," in *War and Moral Injury: A Reader*, ed. Robert Meagher and Douglas Pryer (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 310.

readiness and mission success, and that while a chaplain's highest loyalty is ostensibly towards their religious tradition, the only course of action available for chaplains when military objectives conflict with their religious viewpoints is to resign their commission – with the military objective still being enacted by other parities.<sup>136</sup> This mental health burden also carries with it ethnic dimensions as described above if the chaplain is of Asian descent, again layering the pressures of military service upon these individuals.<sup>137</sup>

There has been a recent change in the US military to take religion more seriously, both in terms of the problems mentioned above, and in terms of acknowledging that understanding religion, especially in foreign operations, can significantly impact mission effectiveness.<sup>138</sup> This has led to the weaponization of religion in some conflicts, and as subject matter experts on religion, chaplains have been called upon to use their religious knowledge in this capacity, leading to further moral ambiguity and accompanying distress about the role of military chaplains who, as discussed above, are not supposed to take part in strategic or tactical military actions due to their non-combatant status.<sup>139</sup>

Some responses to these types of ethical tension involve creating a moral viewpoint that all military actions regardless of how horrific are morally justified.<sup>140</sup> This viewpoint has been present in Western culture and religious outlook for more than a

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<sup>136</sup> Carlson, "Cashing Religion's Currency," 57.

<sup>137</sup> United States Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command Comprehensive Ethics Review Report*, (Department of Defense, January 23, 2020), 4.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>139</sup> Jaqueline Whitt, "Dangerous Liaisons: The Context and Consequence of Operationalizing Military Chaplains," *Military Review* (March-April 2012): 54; Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Religious Affairs in Joint*, 1-2.

<sup>140</sup> Carlson, "Cashing Religion's Currency," 61.

millennia.<sup>141</sup> Concerns about this type of spiritual bypass has become prevalent enough that some Western militaries no longer allow chaplains to provide ethics training to service members, with other militaries recognizing that some chaplain's theological viewpoints actively impede critical decision-making skills when making moral choices.<sup>142</sup>

There are several other sources of burden which may impact Buddhist chaplains, however these reside in the realm of the universal burdens of military service, from physical and social isolation due to overseas postings and deployments, to the mental and physical risks from military service, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), or chemical and burn pit exposure. Most of this research has focused on the impact on primarily enlisted or frontline combat troops. As discussed, military chaplains are neither of these, though they can be placed in danger as will be outlined in *Chapter 4: Data Results*. It is for this reason that an overview of these burdens as not provided here, except or the above discussion on moral injury as that can be seen to have a direct impact on ethical decision making. While some of these factors may be discovered to impact the specific Buddhist chaplains interviewed for this research, especially the burdens of community and isolation, no dedicate research on these topics was discovered to date.

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<sup>141</sup> James McDonald. *Kill Them All! Did a Medieval Abbot Give This Command to His Crusader Troops?* (Goxhill: Academy of Cathar Historical Studies, 2021), 1.

<sup>142</sup> Robinson, *Tragedy of Democracy*, 28.

## Conclusion

The next natural step in this field of research, especially for American Buddhists, is to determine how their own understanding of this received tradition of scripture and real world violence is evolving, especially for those serving in uniform. It is to this overriding concern which the following research will attempt to speak to. The Buddha sought to neutralize the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion, and Buddhist chaplains seek to carry out this task in a military context.<sup>143</sup>

This chapter has provided an overview of what the First Precept is and why there is such a primacy placed on not killing, while at the same time showing how subsidiary scriptural resources have been found to support violence. These resources have melded in the histories and cultures of Buddhist societies, and these teachings and outlooks have subsequently been transmitted to the United States. As the United States has developed parallel to these processes, freedom of religion and the recruitment of Buddhist chaplains into the armed services have taken place. These facets have now all combined to form a nexus, from the scriptural and cultural tradition of Buddhism to American values and military service, arriving together in the form of the Buddhist military chaplain. The following research will seek to explore how all of these facets operate together, from how and why these individuals chose to join the military, how they understand their relationship to the First Precept in a military context, to how they understand their own personal responsibility towards the military and the violence it inflicts on others. With

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<sup>143</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Heart of Buddha's Teaching*, 79.

these questions in mind, the next chapter will present the methods used to collect, analyze and understand these areas of inquiry.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

*Chapter 2. Literature Review* demonstrated how some research has already focused on Buddhist understandings of the military and the First Precept based on canonical sources and as a lived tradition in other societies, but very little scholarship has been published about the context and understanding of American Buddhist military chaplains and how they conceive their ethical responsibilities in this country. Some research has focused on specific clinical interventions which Buddhist chaplains perform in the military or made passing ethical comments, but none has explicitly focused on current Buddhist military chaplains specifically in relationship to the First Precept.<sup>144</sup>

The following research explores how Buddhist Military chaplains in the United States engage with the First Precept through an exploration of their military context, Buddhist tradition, and specific understandings of the First Precept itself. This research intends to explore not only the commonalities discovered between these chaplains, but also the granularity which makes each of their experiences and contexts unique.

This chapter will begin with an outline of the research methodology used in this study beginning with a discussion of the conceptual and ontological frameworks which were utilized to understand this project and its results. This will be followed by an exploration of the grounded theory and phenomenological frameworks which were used to conduct this research. This mixed methodology was utilized in an effort to understand

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<sup>144</sup> Andrew McPaulnarai, “How Buddhist Military Chaplains Can Help Military Servicemen and Servicewomen Cope with the Problems in Their Lives Due to Stress, Pressure, Anxiety, Tension, Trauma, Hassle, Worry, and PTSD,” (DBMin diss., University of the West, 2022), 226; Dryer, “Buddhist Pastoral Ministry,” 202.

both the lived experience of being a Buddhist military chaplain and the impact that may come from working in an environment which ostensibly places the moral values present in the First Precept and the violent work of the military in contention. This section will be followed by a brief discussion of the sampling strategies and time horizons used in this project. The next section will focus on data collection methods and an overview of the semi-structured qualitative interviews utilized in engaging with the chaplains, along with the collection of supporting research focusing on published research, legal policies, and military instructions, etc., as they pertain to Buddhist chaplains. The following section will explore the data analysis process and how ground theory methods were used to code the interviews and how phenomenology helped in condensing and discovering key themes within the data. The next section, methodological output, will present the hard data which resulted from the data analysis methods and outline the key themes which were generated through this process. This discussion will contain comments surrounding participant demographics and the quantifiable results from first, second, and third-cycle coding. Following this section will be a brief discussion of the validation measures used, before leading into a discussion of the potential limitations of this style of methodological approach. Ultimately, this research will help position and contextualize the overall orientation of Buddhist ethical understanding as it pertains to chaplains in service to the military. It may also provide guidance for future Buddhists in how to engage with this question and how to position themselves in an ongoing ethical conversation and pan-Buddhist tradition writ large, as well as highlighting the burdens and possible support needed for the human beings engaged in military chaplaincy.

## Research Methodology

### Conceptual/Ontological Framework

This research does not assume the ability of any researcher to touch what positivists might label “objective reality.” The Buddha once said that “All things are rooted in desire.”<sup>145</sup> This means that there is no way for an observer to ever fully step away from one’s own preconceptions, assumptions, stereotypes, or physical limitations. While the difference between “objective reality” and “internal consistency” is blurred in fields like mathematics, this research instead focuses on how participants interpret and understand themselves and their relationships with others. There is no claim to objective reality, only to a greater understanding of the personally derived meaning and understanding of the research participants in relation to their military service and ethical outlook. At the same time, in order to limit the potential tendency for such research to fall into the realm of pure subjectivism, the following ontological framework was used to help guide, understand, and limit, a purely relativistic exercise.

The works of Joel Hopko, Gregory Scott, and Stephen Garrison discuss how meaning comes through specific phenomena, such as military service, and how exploring the relationship of meaning to military service can help clarify an internal understanding or hermeneutic of how military chaplains see their role and purpose in relationship to their spiritual tradition.<sup>146</sup> In terms of this project, this internal hermeneutical dynamic also exists between the researcher and the project, leading to the ontological or

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<sup>145</sup> Sujato, “Roots (AN 10.58),” Sutta Central, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://dhammatalks.net/suttacentral/sc2016/sc/en/an10.58.html>.

<sup>146</sup> Joel Hopko, Gregory M. Scott, and Stephen M. Garrison. *The Religion & Theology Students Writer’s Manual and Reader’s Guide* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 9, 167.

conceptual framework of both how Buddhist spiritual tradition, the research subjects, and the overall research topic are viewed in this project.

The ontological framework of this research is canonically based on the three modes of reality or the Three Views (*trivabhava*) of imagined, dependent and perfected realities. The concept of the *trivabhava* was first systematically explored in the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra*, one of the key sutras in the Yogacara denomination of Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>147</sup> Later, it was again presented in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, one of the foundational sutras of the Chan and Zen schools.<sup>148</sup> Within the Three Views, imagined reality views the world as objectively real according to mundane perception. Dependent reality comes when the truth of emptiness is understood but conditioned phenomena and their relationships with each other are still treated as real. In perfected reality, phenomena is both perceived and not perceived as real, allowing access to the absolute nature of reality.<sup>149</sup> Despite the implication in their names, these three realities are not seen as hierarchical, even if some of them are more easily accessed than others. The question is rather how one is able to hold all three realities together in such a way that the equal validity of all three viewpoints is upheld at the same time. When a question is raised about how to act in a certain situation, possible responses can be understood through the context of each of the Three Realities, thus allowing a more integrated and self-aware choice to be made, i.e., this process assists in both making moral choices and in uncovering deeper implications or considerations of such choices

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<sup>147</sup> John Keenan, *The Scripture on the Explication of Underlying Meaning* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000), 1, 31.

<sup>148</sup> Red Pine, *The Lankavatara Sutra* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 99.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

which might not always be readily self-evident or perhaps may even be suppressed, intentionally or otherwise.

As this process is directed towards behavioral choices, such as choosing to serve as a military chaplain, and how to respond to differing situations once wearing the uniform, different Buddhist traditions derived varying methods of engaging with this process of moral inquiry. In Vajrayana traditions, this led to three distinct sets of precepts or ethical behavior through the monastic (imagined), bodhisattva (dependent), and tantric (perfected) vows.<sup>150</sup> Chan and Zen traditions did not create distinct sets of vows for each view or reality, but instead looked at a single set of precepts through each of these three lenses, creating the ethical precept practice of literal (imagined), relational / compassionate (dependent), and absolute (perfected) understandings, a practice that has extended within the Mahayana tradition into the modern age.<sup>151</sup>

As a moral process, any action is examined within the context of all Three Views and through the application of wisdom, any challenge from one viewpoint is considered and integrated into a final decision. Although the above discussion has relied heavily on the Mahayana tradition, precept practice that requires this level of nuance and the understanding that questions can and should be examined from different angles has variations which are present in both Theravada and Vajrayana systems of thoughts.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ronald Davidson, "Tibet," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, ed. Robert Buswell, Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>151</sup> Aitken, *Mind of Clover*, 15.

<sup>152</sup> Shravasti Dammika, "Smoking and the Fifth Precept," *Essays on Buddhist Doctrine*, 2008, <https://buddhistuniversity.net/content/essays/smoking>; John Powers, *Wisdom of the Buddha: The Samdhinirmocana Sutra* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1995), 61.

This type of analysis will be utilized in the following way. If a participant states that they themselves are not killing anyone in their personal action as a Buddhist chaplain, this statement would match a literal understanding of ethical behavior. If a participant states that they choose to pursue military chaplaincy out of compassion for military members who might not otherwise have the opportunity to encounter the Dharma, this would embody a relational or compassionate viewpoint and can be seen as the chaplain's desire to not harm the military member's desire to hear the Dharma. Finally, if a participant points to the emptiness of self and other, life and death, then this viewpoint is upholding absolute views of ethical behavior. This ontological framework's primary use in this project is to offer a way to look beyond the face-value of certain actions and helps offer a deeper determination of the worth or harm of the support Buddhist chaplains offer military institutions, their personnel, and themselves.

### **Methodological Framework**

As discussed in the *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, there are plenty of resources within pan-Buddhist tradition to allow a beginning assertion about whether the First Precept does or does not support military service and then search for data to prove that assumption. However, rather than follow that line of inductive reasoning, this research project will instead follow a deductive process of inquiry, based on a mixed approach of psychological phenomenology and grounded theory as outlined in the works of John Creswell's *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*.<sup>153</sup> Psychological phenomenology

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<sup>153</sup> John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 79.

attempts to draw out the primary essence, key themes, or central concern which manifests in a specific phenomena, be it a specific event, situation, or common experience.<sup>154</sup>

Phenomenology accomplishes this through providing a framework to explore the dual supports of textual and structural understandings of the specific phenomena, in this case what it means to serve in the military while holding the First Precept. Structural understandings focused on how these individual people came to be military chaplains and what settings and context they found themselves in. Textual understandings focus on the individualized experiences of the participants in relationship to the research phenomena, i.e. the First Precept, and were established through an exploration of the chaplain's experiences in the military in relationship to ethical practice. These two understandings were then combined and analyzed to draw out the major themes which create the essence of the chaplain's experience (See *Chapter 4: Data Results*). These ethical understandings of the First Precept served as both the phenomenological "key essence," illuminating Buddhist chaplains and their ethical understandings, as well as serving as the "central phenomenon" which grounded theory, the second methodological framework, attempts to uncover.

Psychological phenomenology also creates a framework which helps researchers account for their own preconceptions and assumptions, something which, as mentioned above, the Buddha is fully aware is always in play. Rather than attempting to pretend that the researcher can be fully objective, psychological phenomenology creates a place where the researcher can present their own, or in this case my own, history, relationship,

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

assumptions, and insights into the research topic. This is known as bracketing. Traditionally, bracketing is presented in its own separate section and while a brief biography has already been presented as part of *Chapter 1: Introduction, Problem, and Purpose*, most bracketed information will be presented as footnoted asides whenever I am aware that my own history and outlook are coming into play. This is to allow both ease of reading and an opportunity to compare only directly relevant comments or experiences. While this practice cannot subsume all of my own assumptions, it does help contextualize and acknowledge the impact that my own history and outlook has on this research topic.

The second methodological framework used in this research project was grounded theory. Aspects of grounded theory were used to explore the process and movement in the development of the chaplain's ethical understandings prior to and during military service. The greatest contribution that grounded theory provided to this research was through its coding and analysis methods used for processing the qualitative interview data. These coding practices were used for all data and helped develop central categories which kept the phenomenological "key essence" in focus. Grounded theory ultimately attempts to draw a mostly unified reason, cause, or response – a theory – about a central phenomenon from a wide collection of data points.<sup>155</sup> However, grounded theory as traditionally outlined was ultimately not suitable to be used as the single methodological model in this research. Grounded theory's emphasis on a unifying theory would have overshadowed the granularity of experience present in military chaplains who come from

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 83.

different ethnic, cultural, and spiritual traditions, despite all being under the umbrella term of “Buddhist chaplain.” The purpose of this research, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is to illuminate the different viewpoints present in the pan-Buddhist traditions represented in the US military rather than homogenize them. To do so would be to claim both Theravadin and Vajrayana practitioners share the same ethical outlook and spiritual understanding which led to their military service despite both traditions having vastly different cultural and temporal development throughout history. Furthermore, while grounded theory generally focuses on both analysis and revisiting research participants, given the operational tempo of most military units, it is unlikely that military chaplains will always be available for follow-up interviews and reexaminations, an assumption that was to prove correct as this research progressed. Phenomenology was therefore used to assist in meeting the shortcomings of grounded theory, and when used together, the mixed methodology allowed for both the unifying experiences of engaging in ethical practice while serving in the military and also the unique experience of each chaplain to remain present, either facet of which would have been lost if only a single methodological framework were used.

### **Sampling Strategy, Time Horizon, and Participants**

The time horizon for sociological research can usually take place either longitudinally or as a cross-section. As Buddhist military chaplaincy in the United States only began in 2004, it is only recently that any form of longitudinal study of Buddhist chaplaincy would even be possible, as there has not yet been enough time for more than one or two generations of Buddhist chaplains to exist. Given the constraints that will be

discussed below, this study focused on a cross-section of current or recently separated military Buddhist chaplains from across all branches of the US military.

There are no publicly available records of how many Buddhist chaplains there are in the US Armed Forces, with current census being based on guesswork described in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*. The most comprehensive overview of Buddhist military chaplains came from a privately maintained website which listed a total of 21 Buddhist military chaplains, but was itself, at time of access, outdated with missing pictures and incomplete entries.<sup>156</sup> Of the 21 listed chaplains on this website, I personally knew several of them and knew that some of them did not serve together at the same time, making this website more of a longitudinal marker rather than an accurate cross-section of currently operating Buddhist chaplains. Many Buddhist chaplains do have some type of online presence or are otherwise connected to those who do, and as a former Navy Chaplain Candidate and whose alma mater educated many current and former Buddhist military chaplains, there were ample opportunities to reach out to perspective participants.

From these sources, as many email and social media contact addresses and phone numbers as were publicly available were collected, and upon the successful completion and approval of an Institutional Review Board application (see *Appendix: Institutional Review Board*), the approved emails and social media messages of invitation were sent out. Chaplains who responded to initial inquiries were sent Informed Consent forms (see *Appendix: Institutional Review Board Attachment D*) and a full list of research questions

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<sup>156</sup> [www.MaintaintheMind.com](http://www.MaintaintheMind.com), accessed February 21, 2025.

(see *Appendix: Institutional Review Board Attachment E*) for their review while interview times were scheduled. Informed consent forms included additional support if mental or emotional distress were to arise during the interview process and snow-ball recruitment requests were also prepared for use after interviews to help further increase the sample size for this research project.

## Data Collection

Primary research was conducted through the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews. Supportive information consisted of published or otherwise publicly available sources such as United States policy, legal codes, and military instructions. Insights from Creswell, with clarification from authors such as Katarzyna Peoples, and Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, were useful in developing a semi-structured interview format using open-ended questions.<sup>157</sup> This allowed opportunities to further investigate relevant comments made by the participants, while ensuring that the overall discussion remained germane to the research topic.<sup>158</sup> Examples of structured questions included:

1. Please tell me a little about yourself as a Buddhist military chaplain.
2. What Buddhist ideas or teachings primarily inform your work and motivation as a military chaplain?
3. What is your understanding of the First Precept and how do you manifest this in your work as a chaplain?

A full list of all interview questions can be found in *Appendix: Institutional Review Board Attachment E*. Personal skills developed in chaplaincy training and verified

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<sup>157</sup> Katarzyna Peoples, *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2020), 53; Svend Brinkman and Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2015), 162-163.

<sup>158</sup> Brinkman and Kvale, *InterViews*, 278.

through my own board certification allowed the inclusion of open-ended questions, silences, the ability to highlight and follow up with difficult questions, and the ability to convey safety and goodwill during the discussions, all of which helped facilitate the interview process.<sup>159</sup> All interviews were scheduled to take no more than one hour, with requests for follow-up interviews outlined in informed consent documents. Interviews were recorded on password-protected digital devices and only anonymized transcriptions of interviews or other non-published research instruments were actively utilized during coding and analysis. All transcripts and other forms of media obtained during this research which contained identifiable information were permanently deleted upon the successful completion of this project. Information about these measures to maintain participant confidentiality was included in the informed consent information sent out to all prospective participants.

Given this research's focus on human subjects, there was no need for any specific facilities or settings. As interviews were conducted using video-call services, this allowed participants to choose their own time and location to ensure their comfort and privacy. While the phenomenological aspect of this research requires a structural understanding of the subject's context, this was primarily obtained through publicly available records, media, and publications. This allowed research subjects to be included from vastly disparate geographical duty stations, including one internationally deployed chaplain, as Buddhist chaplains serve at US military commands throughout the world.

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<sup>159</sup> Board of Chaplaincy Certification Inc., "BCCI Competency Essay Writing Guide," Association of Professional Chaplains, May 4, 2020, [https://033012b.membershipsoftware.org/files/application\\_materials/competencies\\_writing\\_guide.pdf](https://033012b.membershipsoftware.org/files/application_materials/competencies_writing_guide.pdf).

## Data Analysis

Data results were analyzed in the following manner. Prior to conducting any interviews, initial bracketed information concerning personal experiences with the First Precept and military service were prepared, along with a continued intention to be aware of new thoughts and memories which might emerge and influence data interpretation, all in accordance with the bracketing methods of psychological phenomenology. As mentioned above, this bracketing is to help assist in offering a place for personal experiences and also served as a source to assist in validation, discussed below. Finally, qualitative methodological assistance from Brinkman and Kvale was used in analyzing and revising the final versions of the interview questions used in this research (See *Appendix: Institutional Review Board Attachment E*).<sup>160</sup> This was useful in helping identify some personal assumptions already in play about the primacy of a literal interpretation of the precepts as the only moral orientation for conducting ethical actions. As mentioned above, each interview was recorded on password-protected digital devices and later sanitized and transcribed into written documents. The sanitization process removed any personally identifying information such as names or specific temple affiliations.

With sanitized transcripts of each interview, methodological coding based on grounded theory was used to analyze participant responses. In order to help organize and expedite coding processes, the computer program Atlas.ti was used, which is a software program specifically developed to help with coding and organizing qualitative research.

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<sup>160</sup> Brinkman and Kvale, *InterViews*, 278.

First-cycle interview coding utilized concurrent mass coding into *in vivo* code categories and used affective coding.

*In vivo* coding involves the simple grouping of statements into similar categories, primarily based on the participant's own terminology and was the primary method of labeling code categories. While the distinction between *in vivo* coding and researcher-produced mass code categories were often close to indistinguishable, i.e. both mass coding and *in vivo* coding would group statements under the same heading for statements involving the term "Four Noble Truths," "Chaplain Role," or "First Precept." *In vivo* coding did help highlight certain key statements that might have been lost otherwise, such as when one participant began referring to idioms, such as "serving according to the customs of the community," which by itself is a monastic precept in some traditions.<sup>161</sup> Idioms such as this can be argued to give carte blanche permission for most behaviors – such as military service – as long as it is serving an ultimately greater purpose or goal, such as the limiting or alleviating suffering. In this way, *in vivo* coding was utilized as a final check to include significant statements which did not appear to fall into any other categories but still appeared to be worthy of consideration when analyzing the overall experience and understandings of this research topic.

Affective coding splits all statements into one of three categories which include the values, beliefs, and attitudes which surround the participants' understanding of their work as military chaplains and their engagement with the First Precept. Values are the fundamental beliefs which each participant holds and offers an insight into the

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<sup>161</sup> Rinchen, *Bodhisattva Vow*, 162.

overarching outlook through which to understand other responses. Beliefs are perceptions that the interviewees hold about themselves, and their own motivations and actions. Attitudes are the viewpoints the interviewees hold about others.<sup>162</sup> These initial benchmark categories were utilized to assist in the separation of interview statements into the textual or personal experience category of the phenomenological framework on the one hand, mostly including values and beliefs, and the structural and contextual categories on the other, primarily composed of belief statements.

Given the holistic nature of spiritual practice and development, a review of the initial categories discovered through first-cycle coding demonstrated the necessity to conduct second-cycle coding in order to further break certain topics into both directional and temporal sub-coding categories. Directional sub-coding is used when a topic is made in reference to a specific subject. For example, when speaking about suffering, participants alternately referred to the military members they serve, their own internal spiritual outlook, and their relationship to their religious or cultural tradition. Given the difference in how the interviewees viewed and understood suffering for each type of subject, directional sub-coding was needed to uncover deeper meanings and outlooks about the topics covered. Temporal sub-coding helps differentiate change of meaning over time and was used primarily on participant viewpoints prior to military service and the development of these viewpoints during military service. These forms of sub-coding helped clarify the movement or process of the ethical understanding of military chaplains.

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<sup>162</sup> Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2021), 163.

Third-cycle coding was then applied and relied more heavily on the grounded theory practice of open coding to create major categories of experience which were common to all participants. This grouping of codes and statements helped reduce overlap in first-cycle codes and began the processing of condensing the multitude of code categories into the major themes or key essences of working with the First Precept as a Buddhist military chaplain. Mirroring the mixed methodology of this project, the categories created through third-cycle coding were split between firstly a more grounded-theory orientation which focused on foundational understandings of how and why the interview participants held their specific viewpoints about the First Precept, and secondly, a more phenomenological textual and structural understanding of the experience of being a military chaplain and the structural context of the environment and relationships in which they operated.

Third-cycle coding began mixing a large portion of the affective first-cycle markers as the themes and categories which emerged through open coding combined attitudes, values, and beliefs into larger thematic groups. This removed the stand-alone usefulness of the first-cycle affective coding in favor of a more holistic understanding of the participant's viewpoints derived from grounded theory and their phenomenological experience. This resulted in affective coding being essentially removed from the coding process once statements were effectively solidified into their key essence categories.

As larger thematic categories began to emerge, it also became clear that some common codes applied to more than one major theme. To rectify this, a further sweep was made for redundant codes, and these were manually reviewed as a check to ensure that no relevant statements were missed. For example, if a statement contained the

generalized code “First Precept” and the specific thematic code “First Precept – Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm” then all coded phrases for “First Precept” were manually reviewed for relevance to the specific theme.

Finally, third-cycle coding condensed significant statements from each interview and combined them into generalized textual categories on how military chaplains engage with the First Precept. These themes were modified through structural understandings of each participant’s unique context of how, where, and in what situations these specific participants manifested their engagement with the First Precept.

Ultimately, third-cycle coding combined grounded theory and phenomenology, forming two sides of the same coin. The first was an outline of the structural context of the chaplains, and the unifying themes of the locations, people, and relationships that formed their military service. The second was the internal and textual understanding of their actions and engagement with the First Precept, again, broken down into several major unifying themes.

This combination of textual and structural understandings as formulated into final significant themes or key essences of the chaplain’s experience are presented in the following chapter as the multiple thematic aspects of chaplain engagement with the First Precept. Finally, in *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*, all categories of experience and understanding were analyzed through the Three Views framework to produce a final analysis of the overall experience of being a Buddhist military chaplain engaged with the First Precept and the thoughts, understandings, and viewpoints which back such engagement.

## **Methodological Output**

Following the processes outlined above, the following data was collected.

### **Participant Demographics**

Eighteen chaplains were identified and contacted utilizing either personal connections or publicly available social media accounts or website contact information. Six chaplains agreed to full interviews exploring their ethical understandings of the First Precept, and a seventh chaplain was recruited through snowball recruitment, for a total of seven chaplains interviewed. Two further chaplains responded to initial contact but turned down interviews due to operational time constraints and the complexities of the research topic. Repeat requests were sent out to those who did not respond to initial inquiries with no new participants recruited, resulting in nine chaplains who did not respond to interview requests. As discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, approximately 80% of all Buddhist chaplains in the United States have been of Asian descent, and this ratio was roughly maintained in the participants for this project. For the seven interviewees, four belonged to Theravada traditions and three belonged to Mahayana or Vajrayana traditions. All interviewees had received Clinical Pastoral Education in addition to the standard education and work experience requirements for military service. All had served on active duty either formally or when activated from within the Reserve components of the military. Of all branches represented in the sample selection, the US Army was the most heavily represented branch, consistent with the estimated distribution of the total number of currently serving Buddhist military chaplains. Three interviews took place over the internet utilizing the videocall programs Zoom and Microsoft Teams which allowed both audio recording and transcription of the

conversations, as well as video services which facilitated non-verbal communication which assisted in clarification during direct discussion. Three interviews took place solely over the phone, and one chaplain elected to write out and email responses to interview questions.

## **Data Coding**

### **First-Cycle Coding**

Following the methodological procedures outlined above seven interviews were analyzed to discover how Buddhist chaplains came to serve in the US military, what their perceptions and understandings of their support to the military was in relationship to the First Precept, and the burdens that were created primarily due to such tensions. First-cycle coding of the interviews resulted in 1326 statements across 109 code categories. Affective coding, which categorized the codes and statements into attitudes, beliefs, and values, divided these statements into 588 statements about attitude, 343 statements about beliefs, and 395 statements about values. Of the 109 code categories, 87 categories were reviewed for the possible need of additional directional or temporal sub-coding. First-cycle coding concluded once 28 of the 87 reviewed categories were identified as needing additional directional or temporal sub-coding (Table 1: First-Cycle Affective Coding).

**Table 1: First-Cycle Affective Coding**

First Cycle Codes	Instances	Attitudes	Beliefs	Values	Reviewed for Sub-Coding	Required Sub-Coding
Accept Real World – Still Killing	2	0	0	2	Yes	
Acceptance \ Letting Go	24	8	11	5	Yes	
Acknowledge Killing –No	27	13	5	9	Yes	
Acknowledge Killing –Yes	27	10	10	7	Yes	
Americans Aren't Buddhists	2	0	2	0	Yes	
Angulimala	5	2	1	2	Yes	
Appeal to Family	1	1	0	0		
Avalokiteshvara	3	1	0	2	Yes	
Bodhisattva Path	4	2	2	0	Yes	
Buddha as Chaplain	2	2	0	0	Yes	
Buddha Nature	1	1	0	0		
Buddhist Chaplains are Uncommon	4	2	1	1	Yes	
Buddhist Teachings	62	20	8	34	Yes	Yes
Buddhist Texts	12	5	1	6	Yes	
Buddhists Can Carry Arms	12	6	4	2	Yes	Yes
Buddhists Get Respect \ Curiosity	3	1	2	0	Yes	
Buddhists Go Where Needed	15	8	2	5	Yes	Yes
Canonical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	1	0	1	0		
Canonical Precedence to Accept Killers	6	2	1	3	Yes	
Carry Weapons	9	6	2	1	Yes	Yes
Challenges	5	3	0	2	Yes	
Chaplain as Monastic?	11	4	6	1	Yes	
Chaplain Growth	8	4	2	2	Yes	
Chaplain Relationship to Military Institution	22	9	6	7	Yes	Yes
Christian Hegemony	7	4	2	1	Yes	Yes

First Cycle Codes	Instances	Attitudes	Beliefs	Values	Reviewed for Sub-Coding	Required Sub-Coding
Command Relationship	24	8	11	5	Yes	Yes
Compassion to Troops	52	22	9	21	Yes	Yes
Cultural Clash	7	3	3	1	Yes	Yes
Daily Duties	30	11	10	9	Yes	
Desire to Serve	17	7	4	6	Yes	
Direct Danger	1	0	1	0		
Direct Killing	13	4	4	5	Yes	Yes
Disrobing	10	8	1	1	Yes	Yes
Diversity	20	4	7	9	Yes	Yes
Don't Judge Others	15	7	2	6	Yes	
Educate Others About Buddhist Chaplaincy	8	1	5	2	Yes	
Educational Background	9	5	3	1	Yes	
Eightfold Path	6	3	2	1	Yes	
Emptiness	6	1	0	5	Yes	
Enlightenment in Killing	2	1	1	0	Yes	
Evasive \ Defensive	18	12	2	4	Yes	Yes
Finances	3	0	0	3	Yes	
Find Own Meaning	21	7	3	11	Yes	Yes
First Precept	149	84	39	26	Yes	Yes
Four Brahma Viharas	7	1	3	3	Yes	Yes
Four Noble Truths	4	1	0	3	Yes	
Gratitude	2	0	2	0	Yes	
Help According to Needs	1	0	1	0		
Help Others Find Meaning	19	8	3	8	Yes	
Historical Government Influence on Buddhism	1	1	0	0		
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6	2	3	1	Yes	

First Cycle Codes	Instances	Attitudes	Beliefs	Values	Reviewed for Sub-Coding	Required Sub-Coding
Home Community	33	17	13	3	Yes	Yes
Individual Counseling	44	18	10	16	Yes	
Intention	26	19	3	4	Yes	Yes
Jataka	2	1	0	1	Yes	
Karma	44	25	8	11	Yes	Yes
Khsitagarba \ Earth Store Bodhisattva	2	0	0	2	Yes	
Killing	45	20	18	7	Yes	
Legal Role of Chaplain \ Constitution \ Rights	2	0	2	0	Yes	
Length of Time in Military	2	2	0	0	Yes	
Mahayana	13	4	4	5	Yes	
Medicine Buddha	1	0	0	1		
Mental Health \ Moral Injury	20	7	4	9	Yes	
Middle Path	3	0	0	3	Yes	
Military \ Monastic Discipline	1	0	1	0		
Military Service Leads to Peace	1	1	0	0		
Military Sexual Trauma	1	0	0	1		
Mindfulness	19	9	4	6	Yes	Ye
Need Direct Experience	1	1	0	0		
Need Reason \ Intellect	1	0	1	0		
Not Responsible for Others	22	11	5	6	Yes	Yes
Office Work	1	1	0	0		
Ordination	10	4	5	1	Yes	
Other Countries Have Buddhist Military	2	1	1	0	Yes	
Penance \ Responsibility for Military	6	3	1	2	Yes	
Personal Interest	2	1	0	1	Yes	

First Cycle Codes	Instances	Attitudes	Beliefs	Values	Reviewed for Sub-Coding	Required Sub-Coding
Power – Chaplain as Officer vs. Enlisted	3	0	0	3	Yes	
Pratimoksha	5	1	3	1	Yes	
Priests vs. Monastics	6	3	3	0	Yes	
Prior Enlisted	5	3	2	0	Yes	
Rahula	1	0	1	0		
Recruiter Lied	1	1	0	0		
Religious Hegemony	11	1	3	7	Yes	
Religious Service	9	3	2	4		
Religious Tensions in Military	28	9	7	12	Yes	Yes
Ritual	9	4	0	5	Yes	Yes
Selfcare	3	2	0	1	Yes	
Self-Directed Duties	3	1	2	0	Yes	
Serve Others	36	20	6	10	Yes	
Spiritual Background	24	14	7	3	Yes	
Spiritual Growth	8	3	2	3	Yes	Yes
Suffering	31	14	5	12	Yes	
Take a Stand – No	37	15	10	12	Yes	
Take a Stand – Yes	20	9	6	5	Yes	
Tathagata \ Suchness	2	1	0	1	Yes	
Theravada	8	7	1	0	Yes	
Three Characteristics – World Suffering	1	0	0	1		
Three Poisons	1	0	1	0		
Three Practices	1	0	0	1		
Three Purifications	1	0	0	1		
Three Refuges	3	2	0	1	Yes	Yes
Triple Gem	1	1	0	0		
Troop Morale	18	6	7	5	Yes	Yes
Upaya	3	2	0	1	Yes	Yes

First Cycle Codes	Instances	Attitudes	Beliefs	Values	Reviewed for Sub-Coding	Required Sub-Coding
Want More Buddhists \ Isolated	6	3	2	1	Yes	
Warfighting Readiness	4	0	4	0	Yes	Yes
Won't Support; If Not in Military	4	3	0	1	Yes	
Zen	2	0	1	1	Yes	
Zhiyi	1	0	0	1		
Totals	1326	588	343	395	87	28

### Second-Cycle Coding

Of the initial 109 code categories, all statements in 87 of the categories were reviewed for the need of additional second-cycle coding for directional or temporal sub-coding. Of these 87 categories, 28 of them required further dedicated temporal and directional sub-coding (Table 2. Second-Cycle Directional and Temporal Coding). This allowed greater context for the statements analyzed, ensuring, for example, that comments made about the interview subjects themselves vs. comments directed towards others, or comments about previous but no longer held viewpoints, were identified and grouped appropriately. Only needing to sub-code 28 categories was somewhat unexpected, but it was discovered that most categories had already been sub-coded by default during the initial coding process. For example, one statement category which appeared to require second-cycle coding – “Acknowledge (that chaplains support) Killing – Yes,” had all statements multi-coded and categorized already into other categories during the first-cycle, including additional codes such as “Canonical Precedence for Buddhists in Military,” “Home Community,” and “Chaplain Relationship to Military Community” already present, thus removing the need for a second dedicated coding

cycle. When merged with the original code list, second-cycle coding resulted in a total of 1326 codes applied among 174 code categories (Table 3. Total Codes).

**Table 2: Second-Cycle Directional and Temporal Coding**

Original Code and Breakdown	Instances
Buddhists Carry Arms	12
Buddhists Carry Arms – Other Countries	2
Buddhists Carry Arms – US	10
Buddhists Go Where Needed	15
Buddhists Go Where Needed – Home Tradition	6
Buddhists Go Where Needed –General	9
Buddhist Teachings	62
Buddhist Teachings – General	14
Buddhist Teachings – Figures	6
Buddhist Teachings – Principles	15
Buddhist Teachings – Scriptural References	27
Carry Weapons	9
Carry Weapons – General	6
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2
Carry Weapons – Others Carry Weapons	1
Chaplain Relationship to Institution	22
Chaplain Relationship to Institution	12
Chaplain Relationship – Chaplain Gives Balance	6
Chaplain Relationship – Military is Deficient	4
Christian Hegemony	7
Christian Hegemony – Fight Against	2
Christian Hegemony – Work with It	5
Command Relationship	24
Command Relationship – General	16
Command Relationship – Contention	5
Command Relationship – Positive	3
Compassion to Troops	52
Compassion to Troops – General	35
Compassion to Troops – Killing Stressors	10

Original Code and Breakdown	Instances
Compassion to Troops – Normal Stressors	7
Cultural Clash	7
Cultural Clash	3
Cultural Clash – Home Tradition vs. Military	3
Cultural Clash – vs. Western Religions	1
Direct Killing	13
Direct Killing – Chaplain Not Responsible	1
Direct Killing – Chaplain Still Responsible	12
Disrobing	10
Disrobing – Disrobed for Military	6
Disrobing – Not Disrobed for military	4
Diversity	20
Diversity – General	18
Diversity – Helps Understand Buddhism	2
Evasive \ Defensive	18
Evasive \ Defensive – But Others Do It Too	2
Evasive \ Defensive – Contradictory Values	4
Evasive \ Defensive – General	1
Evasive \ Defensive – Own Legitimacy in Question	3
Evasive \ Defensive – Results Outweigh Actions	2
Evasive \ Defensive – Small Actions Count	4
Evasive \ Defensive – Won't Answer	2
First Precept	149
First Precept – Applies to Me Only	5
First Precept – Chaplain Still Responsible	6
First Precept – Do Your Job	17
First Precept – General	36
First Precept – Intention Mitigates Killing	16
First Precept – Killing Can be Justified	15
First Precept – My Business, Not Community	6
First Precept – Other Considerations	29
First Precept – Protector / Guardian	7
First Precept – Reduce Harm	12
Find Own Meaning	21
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Killing	3

Original Code and Breakdown	Instances
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Trauma	3
Find Own Meaning – Meaning Before Killing	13
Find Own Meaning – General	2
Four Brahma Viharas	7
Four Brahma Viharas – For Chaplain	1
Four Brahma Viharas – For Troops	6
Home Community	33
Home Community – General	29
Home Community – Not Support Chaplain	4
Intention	26
Intention – General	10
Intention – Mitigates Killing	16
Karma	44
Karma – Collective	12
Karma – Individual – Chaplain	8
Karma – Individual – Troops	24
Mindfulness	19
Mindfulness – Chaplains Mindful of Self	2
Mindfulness – Decrease Harm	3
Mindfulness – General	3
Mindfulness – Helps Killing	2
Mindfulness – Helps Weapons	1
Mindfulness – Troop Care	8
Not Responsible for Others	22
Not Responsible for Others – General	2
Not Responsible for Others – Karma	2
Not Responsible for Others – Not Buddhists	3
Not Responsible for Others – Not Condemn	2
Not Responsible for Others – Social Norms	2
Not Responsible for Others – Troops Own Choice	10
Religious Tensions in Military	28
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Chaplains	3
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Command	10
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Troops	15
Ritual	9

Original Code and Breakdown	Instances
Ritual – Individual Troop Care	1
Ritual – Religious Service	7
Ritual – Selfcare	1
Spiritual Growth	8
Spiritual Growth – General	2
Spiritual Growth – None Happened	1
Spiritual Growth – Other Cultures Help Faith	2
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Broaden Views	1
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Help Faith	2
Three Refuges	3
Three Refuges – Basis for First Precept	1
Three Refuges – Helping Troops	2
Troop Morale	18
Troop Morale – For Command	5
Troop Morale – For Troops	13
Upaya	3
Upaya – Helps Troops	1
Upaya – Support Military Despite Precepts	2
Warfighting Readiness	4
Warfighting Readiness – Creates Stress	1
Warfighting Readiness – General	3

**Table 3: Second-Cycle Total Codes**

Code Category	Instances
Accept Real World – Still Killing	2
Acceptance / Letting Go	24
Acknowledge Killing – No	27
Acknowledge Killing – Yes	27
Americans Aren't Real Buddhists	2
Angulimala	5
Appeal to Family	1
Avalokiteshvara	3
Bodhisattva Path	4
Buddha as Chaplain	2
Buddha Nature	1

Code Category	Instances
Buddhist Chaplains Uncommon	4
Buddhist Teachings – Figures	6
Buddhist Teachings – General	14
Buddhist Teachings – Principles	15
Buddhist Teachings – Scriptural References	27
Buddhist Texts	12
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – Other Countries	2
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – US	10
Buddhists Get Respect / Curiosity	3
Buddhists Go Where Needed – General	9
Buddhists Go Where Needed – Home Tradition	6
Canonical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	1
Canonical Precedence to Accept Killers	6
Carry Weapons – General	6
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2
Carry Weapons – Others Carry Weapons	1
Challenges	5
Chaplain as Monastic?	11
Chaplain Growth	8
Chaplain Relationship to Institution	12
Chaplain to Institution – Gives Balance	6
Chaplain to Institution – Military is Deficient	4
Christian Hegemony – Fight Against	2
Christian Hegemony – Work with It	5
Command Relationship – Contention	5
Command Relationship – General	16
Command Relationship – Positive	3
Compassion to Troops – General	35
Compassion to Troops – Killing Stressors	10
Compassion to Troops – Normal Stressors	7
Cultural Clash	3
Cultural Clash – Buddhism vs. Western Religions	1
Cultural Clash – Home Tradition vs. Military	3
Daily Duties	30
Desire to Serve	17
Direct Danger	1
Direct Killing – Chaplain Not Responsible	1

Code Category	Instances
Direct Killing – Chaplain Still Responsible	12
Disrobing – Disrobed for military	6
Disrobing – Not Disrobed for Military	4
Diversity – General	18
Diversity – Helped Understand Buddhism	2
Don't Judge Others	15
Educate Others About Buddhist Chaplaincy	8
Educational Background	9
Eightfold Path	6
Emptiness	6
Enlightenment in Killing	2
Evasive / Defensive – But Others Do It Too	2
Evasive / Defensive – Contradictory Values	4
Evasive / Defensive – General	1
Evasive / Defensive – Own Legitimacy	3
Evasive / Defensive – Results Outweigh Actions	2
Evasive / Defensive – Small Actions Count	4
Evasive / Defensive – Won't Answer	2
Finances	3
Find Own Meaning – General	2
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Killing	3
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Trauma	3
Find Own Meaning – Meaning Before Killing	13
First Precept – Applies to Me Only	5
First Precept – Chaplain Still Responsible	6
First Precept – Do Your Job	17
First Precept – General	36
First Precept – Intention Mitigates Killing	16
First Precept – Killing Can Be Justified	15
First Precept – My Business, Not Community	6
First Precept – Other Considerations	29
First Precept – Protector / Guardian	7
First Precept – Reduce Harm	12
Four Brahma Viharas – For Chaplain	1
Four Brahma Viharas – For Troops	6
Four Noble Truths	4
Gratitude	2

Code Category	Instances
Help According to Needs	1
Help Others Find Meaning	19
Historical Government Influence on Buddhism	1
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6
Home Community – General	29
Home Community – Not Support Chaplain	4
Individual Counseling	44
Intention	10
Intention – Mitigates Killing	16
Jataka	2
Karma – Collective	12
Karma – Individual – Chaplain	8
Karma – Individual – Troops	24
Khsitagharba / Earth Store Bodhisattva	2
Killing	45
Legal Role of Chaplains / Constitution / Rights	2
Length of Time in Military	2
Mahayana	13
Medicine Buddha	1
Mental Health / Moral Injury	20
Middle Path	3
Military / Monastic Discipline	1
Military Service Leads to Peace	1
Military Sexual Trauma	1
Mindfulness – Chaplains Mindful of Self	2
Mindfulness – Decrease Harm	3
Mindfulness – General	3
Mindfulness – Helps Killing	2
Mindfulness – Helps Weapons	1
Mindfulness – Troop Care	8
Need Direct Experience	1
Need Reason / Intellect	1
Not Responsible for Others	2
Not Responsible for Others – Not Buddhists	3
Not Responsible for Others – Troops Choice	10
Not Responsible for Others –Karma	2
Not Responsible for Others –Not Codem	2

Code Category	Instances
Not Responsible for Others –Social Norms	2
Not Responsible for Others –Won't Support	1
Office Work	1
Ordination	10
Other Countries Have Buddhist Military	2
Penance / Responsibility for Military	6
Personal Interest	2
Power – Chaplain as Officer vs. Enlisted	3
Pratimoksha	5
Priests vs. Monastics	6
Prior Enlisted	5
Rahula	1
Recruiter Lied	1
Religious Hegemony	11
Religious Service	9
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Chaplains	3
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Command	10
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Troops	15
Ritual – Individual Troop Care	1
Ritual – Religious Service	7
Ritual – Selfcare	1
Selfcare	3
Self-Directed Duties	3
Serve Others	36
Spiritual Background	24
Spiritual Growth – General	2
Spiritual Growth – None Happened	1
Spiritual Growth – Other Cultures Help Faith	2
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Broaden Views	1
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Help Faith	2
Suffering	31
Take a Stand – No	37
Take a Stand – Yes	20
Tathagata / Suchness	2
Theravada	8
Three Characteristics – World Suffering	1
Three Poisons	1

Code Category	Instances
Three Practices	1
Three Purifications	1
Three Refuges – Chaplain's Basis for First Precept	1
Three Refuges – Helping Troops	2
Triple Gem	1
Troop Morale – For Command	5
Troop Morale – For Troops	13
Upaya – Helps Troops	1
Upaya – Support Military Despite Precepts	2
Want More Buddhist Community / Isolated	6
Warfighting Readiness – Creates Stress	1
Warfighting Readiness – General	3
Won't Support; If Not in Military	4
Zen	2
Zhiyi	1
<b>Total Codes</b>	<b>Total Instances</b>
174	1326

### Third-Cycle Coding

Third-Cycle coding utilized mass coding, sometimes referred to as open coding, to condense all of these categories and statements into a total of 15 key topic areas, with six primary categories focused on the structural context or real-world situation of military chaplains, and nine primary categories on the textual context or viewpoints and understandings of these same chaplains. Mass coding also categorized the total number of relevant statements discovered for each topic. Each key theme contained multiple code categories, with an average of about 15 code categories covering 60-80 code occurrences. Code categories and occurrences ranged from as few as 5-6 codes in the smallest themes, to the greatest theme containing 35 codes, though most of the 35 codes only contained one or two occurrences each. Especially within the textual categories,

some code categories were reviewed multiple times for each theme to ensure that some individual statements which might have bearing on multiple topics would not be overlooked. For example, all statements which only had the category “First Precept” were reviewed for relevance for each of the nine themes which explored different facets of the First Precept. This process of verification encompassed seven redundant codes covering 180 statements. The condensation of second-cycle codes into third-cycle thematic categories can be seen in Tables 4: Third-Cycle Mass Coding. A compiled list of only the key themes can be found in Table 5: Textual and Structural Themes.

#### **Tables 4: Third-Cycle Mass Coding**

**Table 4.A: Who are the Chaplains?**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Desire to Serve	17	
Educational Background	9	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Chaplain	1	
Home Community – General	29	
Home Community – Not Support	4	
Need Direct Experience	1	
Personal Interest	2	
Prior Enlisted	5	
Serve Others	36	
Spiritual Background	24	
Three Refuges – Chaplain Basis for First Precept	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
11	129	<b>Who are the Chaplains?</b>

**Table 4.B: A Military Chaplain and a Religious Leader**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Buddha as Chaplain	2	
Buddhists Go Where Needed – Home Tradition	6	
Chaplain as Monastic?	11	
Disrobing – Disrobed for Military	6	
Disrobing – Not Disrobed for Military	4	
Evasive / Defensive – Own Legitimacy	3	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Chaplain	1	
Length of Time in Military	2	
Military / Monastic Discipline	1	
Mindfulness – Chaplains Mindful of Self	2	
Ordination	10	
Priests vs. Monastics	6	
Recruiter Lied	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
13	55	<b>A Military Chaplain and a Religious Leader</b>

**Table 4.C: Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Angulimala	5	
Avalokiteshvara	3	
Bodhisattva Path	4	
Buddha as Chaplain	2	
Buddha Nature	1	
Buddhist Teachings – General	14	
Buddhist Teachings – Figures	6	
Buddhist Teachings – Principles	15	
Buddhist Teachings – Scriptural References	27	
Buddhist Texts	12	
Eightfold Path	6	
Emptiness	6	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Troops	6	
Four Noble Truths	4	
Gratitude	2	
Help According to Needs	1	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Jataka	2	
Khsitagharba / Earth Store Bodhisattva	2	
Mahayana	13	
Medicine Buddha	1	
Middle Path	3	
Pratimoksha	5	
Rahula	1	
Suffering	31	
Tathagata / Suchness	2	
Theravada	8	
Three Characteristics – World Suffering	1	
Three Poisons	1	
Three Practices	1	
Three Purifications	1	
Three Refuges – Helping Troops	2	
Triple Gem	1	
Upaya – Helps Troops	1	
Upaya – Support Military Despite Precepts	2	
Zen	2	
Zhiyi	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
36	195	<b>Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings</b>

**Table 4.D: Daily Activities and  
Command Relationship**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Chaplain Relationship – Gives Balance	4	
Chaplain Relationship – Military is Deficient	6	
Chaplain Relationship to Institution	12	
Command Relationship – Contention	5	
Command Relationship – General	16	
Command Relationship – Positive	3	
Culture Clash – Home Tradition vs. Military	3	
Legal Role of Chaplains / Constitution / Rights	2	
Office Work	1	
Self-Directed Duties	3	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Troop Morale – For Command	5	
Warfighting Readiness – Creates Stress	1	
Warfighting Readiness – General	3	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
13	64	<b>Daily Activities and Command Relationship</b>

**Table 4.E: Daily Activities and  
Enlisted Relationship**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acceptance / Letting Go	24	
Compassion to Troops – Normal Stressors	7	
Daily Duties	30	
Direct Danger	1	
Finances	3	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Trauma	3	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Troops	6	
Help Others Find Meaning	19	
Individual Counseling	44	
Mental Health / Moral Injury	20	
Military Sexual Trauma	1	
Mindfulness – General	3	
Mindfulness – Troop Care	8	
Need Reason / Intellect	1	
Power – Chaplain Officer vs. Enlisted	3	
Religious Service	9	
Ritual – Individual Troop Care	1	
Ritual / Religious Service	7	
Three Refuges Helping Troops	2	
Troop Morale – For Troops	13	
Upaya – Helps Troops	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
21	206	<b>Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship</b>

**Table 4.F: Relationship with Other  
(Non-Buddhist) Chaplains**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Americans Aren't Real Buddhists	2	
Buddhist Chaplains Uncommon	4	
Buddhists Get Respect / Curiosity	3	
Challenges	5	
Chaplain Growth	8	
Christian Hegemony – Fight Against	2	
Christian Hegemony – Work with It	5	
Cultural Clash	3	
Culture Clash – Buddhism vs. Western Religions	1	
Diversity – General	18	
Diversity – Helped Understand Buddhism More	2	
Educate Others About Buddhist Chaplaincy	8	
Karma – Individual – Chaplain	8	
Penance / Responsibility for Military	6	
Religious Hegemony	11	
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Chaplains	3	
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Command	10	
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Troops	15	
Ritual – Selfcare	1	
Selfcare	3	
Spiritual Growth – General	2	
Spiritual Growth – None Happened	1	
Spiritual Growth – Other Cultures Help Faith	2	
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Broaden Views	1	
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Help Faith	2	
Want More Buddhist Community / Isolated	6	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
26	132	<b>Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains</b>

**Table 4.1: What is the First Precept?**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acknowledge Killing – No	27	
Acknowledge Killing – Yes	27	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6	
Killing	45	
Mahayana	13	
Pratimoksha	5	
Theravada	8	
	Total Instances	
	9	196
		<b>What is the First Precept?</b>

**Table 4.2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Accept Real World – Still Killing	2	
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – Other Countries	2	
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – US	10	
Canonical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	1	
Canonical Precedence to Accept Killers	6	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
First Precept – Reduce Harm	12	
First Precept– Killing Can Be Justified	15	
Historical Government Influence on Buddhism	1	
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6	
Karma – Collective	12	
Killing	45	
Military Service Leads to Peace	1	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Condemn	2	
Not Responsible for Others – Social Norms	2	
Other Countries Have Buddhist Military	2	
	Total Instances	
	17	184
		<b>Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm</b>

**Table 4.3: Carrying Arms**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – Other Countries	2	
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – US	10	
Canonical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	1	
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2	
Carry Weapons – Others Carry Weapons	1	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6	
Killing	45	
Mindfulness – Helps Killing	2	
Mindfulness – Helps Weapons	1	
Other Countries Have Buddhist Military	2	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
13	143	<b>Carrying Arms</b>

**Table 4.4: Intention and Guardianship**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2	
Carry Weapons – Others Carried Weapons	1	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Do Your Job	17	
First Precept – Intention Mitigates Killing	16	
First Precept – Other Considerations	34	
First Precept – Protector / Guardianship	7	
Intention – General	10	
Intention – Intention Mitigates Killing	16	
Killing	45	
Mindfulness – Decrease Harm	3	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
12	193	<b>Intention and Guardianship</b>

**Table 4.5: Service Member's Burden of Killing**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Buddhists Go Where Needed – General	9	
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Compassion to Troops – General	35	
Compassion to Troops – Killing Stressors	10	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Killing	3	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Killing	45	
Mental Health / Moral Injury	20	
Military Sexual Trauma	1	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Condemn	2	
Upaya – Support Military Despite Precepts	2	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
12	198	<b>Service Member's Burden of Killing</b>

**Table 4.6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acknowledge Killing – No	27	
Direct Killing – Chaplain Not Responsible	1	
Don't Judge Others	15	
Evasive / Defensive – Small Actions Count	4	
Evasive / Defensive – Won't Answer	2	
Find Own Meaning – General	2	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Killing	3	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning Before Killing	13	
First Precept – Applies to Me Only	5	
First Precept – Do Your Job	17	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – My Business, Not Community	6	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Karma – Individual – Chaplain	8	
Karma – Individual – Troops	24	
Killing	45	
Not Responsible for Others – General	2	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Not Responsible for Others – Karma	2	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Buddhists	3	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Condemn	2	
Not Responsible for Others – Troops Own Choice	10	
Take a Stand – No	37	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
22	293	<b>Chaplain Responsibility for for Killing</b>

**Table 4.7: Chaplain Advice for Civilians**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Appeal to Family	1	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Killing	45	
Not Responsible for Others – Won't Support	1	
Won't Support; If Not in Military	4	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
6	116	<b>Chaplain Advice for Civilians</b>

**Table 4.8: Killing May Be Permissible**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Enlightenment in Killing	2	
Evasive / Defensive – But Others Do It Too	2	
Evasive / Defensive – Contradictory Values	4	
Evasive / Defensive – General	1	
Evasive / Defensive – Results Outweigh Actions	2	
First Precept – General	36	
Jataka	2	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
7	49	<b>Killing May Be Permissible</b>

**Table 4.9: The Burdens of the Chaplain**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acknowledge Killing – Yes	27	
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2	
Carry Weapons – Others Carry Weapons	1	
Direct Killing – Chaplain Still Responsible	12	
First Precept – Chaplain Still Responsible	6	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Killing	45	
Take a Stand – Yes	20	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
10	187	<b>The Burdens of the Chaplain</b>

**Table 5: Structural and Textual Themes**

<b>Structural Themes and Chaplain Context</b>
A. Who are the Chaplains?
B. Being a Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader
C. Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings
D. Daily Activities and Command Relationship
E. Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship
F. Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains
<b>Textual Themes and the First Precept</b>
1. What is the First Precept?
2. Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm
3. Carrying Arms
4. Intention and Guardianship
5. Service Member's Burden of Killing
6. Chaplain Responsibility for Killing
7. Chaplain Advice for Civilians
8. Killing May Be Permissible
9. The Burdens of the Chaplain

## Validation

A modified validation format following Layther's Early Framework was used to validate findings utilizing multi-level triangulation of data sources from within this study to validate interview responses.<sup>163</sup> This focused on exploring whether participant responses were being referenced or were consistent with canonical sources and the history and organizational standards of the chaplain's Buddhist tradition. When responses were found to not be parallel with previously recognized canonical or organizational viewpoints, the responses were further examined in the moment of the interview, and subsequently further researched as needed during data analysis for canonical or historical context. This was especially brought into play when interview responses were substantiated or defended with foreign language phrases, scriptural references, or historical allusions. Triangulation of data was utilized in comparing responses from interview participants who came from the same specific Buddhist school. This validation method was reinforced by face validation based on my own familiarity with Buddhist tradition and military service over the past 16 years. Finally, construct validation was used during data synthesis in examining how research results fit within the Three Views of literal, relational, and absolute ethical action found within the ontological framework from the *Lankavatara Sutra*.

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<sup>163</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 247.

## Methodological Limitations

The following limitations are present within the methodological and research structures of this project. One of the greatest limitations in this project was sample size. Both the total number of Buddhist military chaplains and the total number who agreed to participate in this research project are small. As the total number of military chaplains is low, this means that each response may take on undue significance in relationship to the research as a whole. A single outlying response will have a greater impact on the overall orientation of the research than would otherwise occur with a larger sample size. This possibility made the process of validation, discussed above, all the more important, so as not to present a single opinion, especially if it was very different from all other interview responses, as an overarching and universally accepted viewpoint.

Military operational tempo also presented a major hurdle in conducting this type of research. Work schedules and deployments prevented stable communication, especially with active duty service members. Communication, analysis, and returning to discussion for clarification as research progressed became difficult, thus losing the potential for interviewees to clarify, elucidate, recant, or expand on any of their original responses. Operational requirements also often require service members to be “off grid” and be unable to communicate with people in the civilian sphere for months at a time. This impacted one of the primary advantages of grounded theory – namely the ability to research and return to the research participants for clarification and exploration of new areas of discussion, which might otherwise lead to a further refined conclusion.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> While deployed in the Navy, we would often set “River City.” River City 4 meant that there was free communication on and off the ship –phones, TV, internet connections, were all freely available. River City

Finally, the route of the military career itself impacts the ability to contact a statistically significant number of individuals at any one time. Initial military contracts for officers can be as short as two years, making it difficult to have a large sample size of actively serving Buddhist chaplains at any one time.<sup>165</sup>

Another major hurdle in this research was the need for anonymity among participants. With the small census of Buddhist chaplains in the military, there was a greater need to obfuscate some interview responses in ways other than would normally be needed. For example, there are currently only two Navy Chaplains, one male, one female, and so when discussing the Navy, even stating “She said” already provides enough information to identify the subject. The same dynamic not only exists within different branches of the military, but within the Buddhist denominations these chaplains represent. Some denominations only have a single chaplain serving in the military, and so stating “a Soto Zen chaplain” can also be enough to identify a participant in certain situations. This limited the ability to discuss specific denominational differences in ethical outlook or even clearly identify several of the participant’s parent traditions. It is also for this reason that examples of full interview transcripts are unable to be made available.

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I meant only mission essential signals were allowed on or off the ship. River City 1 was routinely set during flight operations but was also set when the ship was passing through strategically dangerous areas such as the Strait of Hormuz or the Suez Canal. It was not uncommon for River City 1 to be set for several weeks, with only an hour or two of River City 4 every few days as we navigated unfriendly waters. River City is taken seriously and at one time quite the fracas occurred when a junior sailor turned on his personal cellphone to play CandyCrush and that one signal was enough for our ship to be located and targeted.

<sup>165</sup> When in the Navy Chaplain Candidate Program, the 2-year initial contract was one of the consistently emphasized advantages of becoming a Navy Chaplain. We were often told “You can do anything for two years, just sign up and then you’ll be able to see if you like it without having to make a major commitment.” This very much surprised me as my initial contract as an enlisted member for the Navy was 5 years, even longer than the standard 4-year enlistment.

Small sample size was the primary reason why this research leaned so heavily into qualitative research and upheld not only the underlying general principles of grounded theory, which by themselves would be better supported by a larger sample size, but also the experience and context of the individual research participants upheld through phenomenology which values individual experience as significant in and of itself. That being said, it is a good reminder that the aim of this research is to help form a foundation of understanding which future scholars will be able to build upon and use either as continued validation or evidence of changing perception and understanding within the American Buddhist community.

## **Conclusion**

This research has set out to interpret the outlook and experiences of Buddhist military chaplains through the ontological lens of the Three Views of literal, relational, and absolute, as presented in the *Lankavatara Sutra* in order to understand how these chaplains embody their relationship and responsibility towards the First Precept in a military context. This project utilized the mixed methodological approaches of psychological phenomenology and grounded theory to uphold both the unique textual and structural experiences of each individual chaplain, while simultaneously beginning the process of uncovering underlying and unifying themes which connect and intersect within this specific population. In this way, both the unique context of the chaplains was able to be persevered while also bringing to light several main themes which reappeared in the chaplains' experiences. This qualitative goal was accomplished through a cross-sectional semi-structured interviewing process of Buddhist military chaplains who have

served on active duty, which included deployments and overseas postings. The data received from these interviews was analyzed through a three-cycle coding process. The first cycle explored affective statements which focused on the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the participants. Second-cycle coding applied open and *in vivo* coding categories to the interview statements, as well as exploring the directional and temporal facets of their comments. Third-cycle coding coalesced these code categories into primary themes or key essences of military service and engaging with the First Precept as a military chaplain. These themes were split roughly in half between the structural/contextual experience of being a military chaplain and the underlying ethical orientation, outlook, and burdens of these chaplains. These categories and results were finally examined in terms of how each of these themes fit within the Three Views of literal, relational, and absolute ethical action found within the ontological framework of the *Lankavatara Sutra*.

Through this process, the participant statements will be combined and distilled to allow an overall understanding of who these chaplains are and how they came to be in the military, how they understand both the First Precept and their responsibility towards the violence inherent in the military institution they support, and the resulting burdens which may come about from this service.

## Chapter 4: Data Results

Following Creswell's phenomenological example of combining structural and textual facets to reveal the essence of the experience, these essential themes are presented here as 15 individual thematic elements backed by the most salient significant statements, direct quotes, and key words used by the participants.<sup>166</sup> The following themes are broken into structural and textual categories. Structural themes will be examined first to provide an overall context for the textual themes. Structural themes will address chaplain background, daily duties, and overall integration into military structures, limits of reach, and overall vocational responsibilities. Analysis of the interviews revealed six key structural themes which address these topics. When taken as a whole, these structural themes will provide the foundation to better understand the ethical outlook and obligation of the chaplains when the First Precept is specifically examined. Textual themes focus specifically on the research question of how the chaplains understand the First Precept, what their responsibilities towards upholding military violence are, and how they understand the tension between the First Precept and military service. Methodological analysis uncovered nine textual themes which directly address the First Precept. For both structural and textual themes, each theme presented here will include a chart which details the specific codes reviewed in the construction of the theme and the number of statements reviewed for each code, as originally presented in Table 4, *Chapter 3: Methodology*. Structural themes will be lettered, while textual themes will be numbered.

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<sup>166</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 333.

Themes that present multiple or contradictory viewpoints have subheadings, while themes that present unified understandings from the chaplains will not. As a starting reference, the following is a reiterated full list of all structural and textual themes which shall be discussed from Table 5 in *Chapter 3: Methodology*.

**Table 5 (Reiterated)**

<b>Structural Themes and Chaplain Context</b>
A. Who are the Chaplains?
B. Being a Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader
C. Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings
D. Daily Activities and Command Relationship
E. Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship
F. Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains
<b>Textual Themes and the First Precept</b>
1. What is the First Precept?
2. Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm
3. Carrying Arms
4. Intention and Guardianship
5. Service Member's Burden of Killing
6. Chaplain Responsibility for Killing
7. Chaplain Advice for Civilians
8. Killing May Be Permissible
9. The Burdens of the Chaplain

## Structural Themes

### Theme A: Who are the Chaplains?

**Table 4.A: Who are the Chaplains? (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Desire to Serve	17	
Educational Background	9	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Chaplain	1	
Home Community – General	29	
Home Community – Not Support	4	
Need Direct Experience	1	
Personal Interest	2	
Prior Enlisted	5	
Serve Others	36	
Spiritual Background	24	
Three Refuges – Chaplain Basis for First Precept	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
11	129	<b>Who are the Chaplains?</b>

The first theme focuses on the background of the chaplains and the lead-up to their military service. This theme more than others requires the use of generalized terms to maintain participant anonymity as many of these chaplains are one-of-one when it comes to the intersection of their Buddhist affiliation, branch of service, gender, and/or ethnic background. For example, when I served as a Chaplain Candidate in the US Navy, I would have been identified immediately as the only possible person if someone referenced a Navy Chaplain who was a “Zen Buddhist,” a “white male,” a “Mahayana chaplain,” or, at the time, on “active duty.” For this reason, this theme will be more vague than necessarily desirable, while still highlighting several key components among the participants.

Of the participants interviewed, all were male, with four members of Theravada traditions, and three representatives of Mahayana or Vajrayana traditions.<sup>167</sup> All participants were fully fluent in English, but only one had English as a first language and was born in the United States. All participants held graduate degrees, and all but one of the chaplains had formally served as temple-based monastics prior to joining the military. Two of the participants had served as prior enlisted military members before transferring to their respective Chaplain Corps, with most participants representing the US Army. At least half of the participants had either started their service in, or had served in, the Reserves and had been activated for duty at various points of their careers, with the remainder serving fully on active duty. While all the participants had been activated or deployed, none of the participants reported being in direct combat or coming under enemy fire. Most motivations for joining the military focused on the desire to serve others. As one chaplain stated,

I want to serve others. Before that time my whole life had been serving the Buddhist community and now with a new community in the United States, I can serve a different community.

Some chaplains were slightly more triumphant about their desire for serving, with one chaplain, referring to himself in the third person, stating,

He derives no greater pleasure than knowing that he can help others; he believes that “the most honorable job in this world is serving people.” When he was aware of the need for chaplains, he volunteered to fulfill his goal to bring peace to the world...Therefore, the Buddha recommends that monks should go for ministry in different directions for the assistance and happiness of others and bring compassion to the world.

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<sup>167</sup> To my knowledge there is only one female Buddhist chaplain currently in all the branches of the US military, and she is one of two female Buddhist chaplains who have ever served.

Other chaplains were a little more nonchalant about their motivations for joining,

I was interested in becoming a Buddhist chaplain and the recruiters said there are not a lot of Buddhist chaplains in the Army and they needed some. So I said, “Why not?” So I joined.

Another chaplain spoke about feeling directly requested to join the military to support Buddhist service members who had already enlisted after 9/11.

After the incident on September 11, 2001, in our community we had a few Buddhist followers who got the call to join the military and were deployed to the Middle East. They would call me sometimes and tell me they really needed a Buddhist chaplain. At that time, we didn’t have any Buddhist chaplains. But because I heard the call from my soldiers, I wanted to learn about being a chaplain. I talked with my senior monks and most of them supported me to go and help the soldiers, so I signed my name and joined.

Some of the participants mentioned specific Buddhist figures or aspirations when discussing their desire to commission. One chaplain mentioned walking the Bodhisattva Path with his service members, while another chaplain referenced Avalokiteshvara, or Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. A further participant spoke of a different bodhisattva while referring to a part of the chaplain recruitment process universal across all branches of the military,

They require you, when coming in as a chaplain, to write out a whole “why I want to be a chaplain” document, and my document was exactly that, that I am here to serve others. It revolved a whole lot about the Earth Store Bodhisattva and his/her many adventures into the hell realms.<sup>168</sup>

A final chaplain explored the Four Brahma Viharas as a key motivation for serving in the military.

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<sup>168</sup> I was also required to write a similar document for the Navy. An active-duty chaplain told me that the primary purpose of chaplaincy in the military is to enable mission accomplishment, and that neither the Navy nor the commanders under whom I would serve, care about people’s spirituality unless it directly contributes to mission accomplishment. The only teaching religion should offer is that the Navy is right and the individual sailor must sacrifice all other considerations to get the job done. I wrote just that, talking about how chaplains need to ensure that sailors are resilient and spiritually fit to achieve mission goals.

I was interviewed when I was a chaplain, and I put out the Four Elements or Four Qualities that are most important for the Buddhist chaplain. They are loving-kindness, compassion, joyfulness and equanimity. These are the four values that I brought with me into the military.

The chaplains' home communities were mostly supportive of the chaplains' decision to join the military. Some home communities were already familiar with chaplaincy and had experience with temple members working simultaneously with government entities.

They are supportive. I know that back home several monks in my tradition also served in the army as chaplains. So, my root temple is familiar with the concept of a chaplain. When I came back and told them I am a chaplain, they were OK with that... Now a days there are some ways to be connected with the government back home. The government still controls and influences who ordains as monks and nuns, they are still involved.

Other communities had little previous experience with military chaplaincy but were excited about the opportunities that the field would open up for their members to serve in.

My home temple has this concept that the temple should be seen like a wall socket, you go there to recharge and energize, and then we go out and live our normal day-to-day life. So, we're always looking for new places and new ways that we can be of benefit to people and one of the ways was chaplaincy... So I kind of looked at it and thought it through and talked to the clergy at my temple. They said, "Hey, this is a great idea, go do it," and they gave me their blessing to go do so.

This level of support was not immediately given to all participants. One chaplain recounts the growing pains surrounding his relationship with his home community as they learned about military chaplaincy.

When I joined it became an argument among my Buddhist community. As a monk you're not supposed to take a full-time job, not supposed to work outside the temple. That was one thing, the other thing is as a monk you're not supposed to go into the military. After ten years people finally got used to it. More people got to know what a chaplain does, that I'm not in combat and that I'm there to

help people who are practicing the Bodhisattva Path. But in the United States, they are more conservative than people in my home country. They take tradition and culture seriously and they want them to be preserved and passed down. So, some of them were very supportive and some of them were very upset. Some of them were very disappointed, and some of them were confused. I got a lot of calls from my disciples and also spent time with them to talk to them and let them know what's going on.

This individual also stated that this introduction of chaplaincy to his home community was one of his major goals in joining the military to begin with.

In terms of my Mahayana Buddhist practice, I think I opened the gate. I ice break-ed. I opened the window for future generations to come and see that it is possible to serve, to step up, to step out of their comfort zone in my community, culture, and religion, and really join the US community to bring a voice to Buddhist teachings and to introduce and contribute to the US community as a whole. So, this is my goal, to break this ice, to open up the window. Probably this window is going to be small, but it is still open.

Across the backgrounds of all these chaplains and their motivations for military service, one participant highlighted many of the above points common to most chaplains interviewed for the project. He summarized,

I came to the US as a Buddhist monk. At that time, I just wanted to study English, so the perfect way to be among American people was by working at my Buddhist temple. I had experience in Buddhism already, so I wanted to have a different experience and challenged myself by joining the military. I thought about joining the military back home, but I didn't because of the requirements, so I wanted to challenge myself and bring my experience and share my work with others who might need it. So, I came into the candidate program. After 3 years in seminary, I went to a CPE program while I was in the Reserves. Then a 2-year CPE residency, and afterwards I came to active duty as a chaplain.

### **Theme B: A Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader**

**Table 4.B: A Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Buddha as Chaplain	2	
Buddhists Go Where Needed – Home Tradition	6	
Chaplain as Monastic?	11	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Disrobing – Disrobed for Military	6	
Disrobing – Not Disrobed for Military	4	
Evasive / Defensive – Own Legitimacy	3	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Chaplain	1	
Length of Time in Military	2	
Military / Monastic Discipline	1	
Mindfulness – Chaplains Mindful of Self	2	
Ordination	10	
Priests vs. Monastics	6	
Recruiter Lied	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
13	55	<b>A Military Chaplain and a Religious Leader</b>

The role of the chaplain requires that they be both a military officer and a religious leader at the same time. As the religious leaders of home congregations, these communities were all impacted by the chaplain's decision to leave the congregation and turn to military service. Some religious traditions welcome their leaders to be both a spiritual and a military figure at the same time. *Chapter 2: Literature Review* explored how the acceptance of the dual role of a military and religious leader is taken for granted in most Western religious traditions and is subsumed in the chaplain recruitment process in the United States. As described above when surveying the First Precept, this type of dual role is equally assumed to be inconsistent in many Asian Buddhist traditions. This has led to a tension in Buddhist communities as to whether an individual may hold both religious and military standing at the same time when serving as a chaplain. As Buddhist religious leaders have traditionally been monastics rather than ministers or pastors, the participants in this study were acutely aware of this question. As monastic status is

virtually synonymous with holding the precepts, it becomes an important theme for exploration. Many of the candidates came from traditions with a strict monastic-laity divide, requiring the chaplains to disrobe before joining the military.

The precepts we receive are the same precepts the Buddha taught monastics back then, that monks cannot stay in the military for more than three nights. That is one of the precepts. And as a monk you cannot wear an army uniform. As a monk your responsibility isn't to the military, your responsibility is to your practice community, to preserving the teachings, maintaining holy conduct, and ordaining younger generations of monastics.

This participant highlights a key difference held by some of the chaplain's home communities, namely that in some traditions full monastics are not allowed to serve in the military. This viewpoint was primarily held by those representing the Theravada tradition, but it was echoed by one Mahayana chaplain as well. Other participants stated that they continue to uphold their monastic precepts within their military service and saw themselves as both fully monastic and fully military at the same time, pointing to honesty and transparency towards one's tradition and oneself as the lynchpin for balancing both worlds.

But if you're basically open and transparent that you are there to serve, then there's no doubt about the precepts. For example, if you have doubts and say, "Hey this venerable is going to the military because he supports the war," then this becomes an issue with the precepts. But if you're transparent, for example, where I go, I am transparent with myself. I will let the congregation know where I am going, and then it does not become a different case. We call this, "adjusting accordingly to local needs."<sup>169</sup> But the point is transparency. This is how Mahayana interprets this precept, but in Theravada you need to renounce your monkhood. In our tradition you don't have to disrobe, but you have to be honest about it.

Another participant echoed this viewpoint stating,

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<sup>169</sup> In some Mahayana traditions, "Adjusting accordingly to local needs" is a precept in its own right. Rinchen, *Bodhisattva Vow*, 162.

Buddhist chaplains and Buddhist monks are the same if they are still keeping their precepts and keep their vows. Beside the precepts, we also have the Bodhisattva Vows in Mahayana for monastics. So, I would say that Buddhist monks and Buddhist chaplains would depend on the tradition they come from. In Theravada traditions when they disrobe to put on the military uniform, they are no longer monastics, but in my tradition, I am still a monastic. I am still a chaplain. I am keeping my precepts, and this is a kind of difference between the traditions.

For some participants this led to an ongoing discussion about what constitutes a “monk” vs. a “priest” or “minister,” especially as Asian traditions are transformed into Western variations.

A new tradition right now in this country is when students call themselves monks or nuns, when they have received only 16 precepts, so they are not monks and nuns from a traditional perspective.

This viewpoint that a chaplain is slightly different from a fully ordained monastic was echoed by another participant, but with an emphasis that being part of an overall Buddhist community emolliated the impact of this difference.

In my tradition I am no longer a monk who is at the temple, so I don’t know the correct word, but I am OK with “chaplain.” It means I am a religious leader, but that doesn’t mean that I am a full 100% monk who stays at the temple. Right now, I am considered disrobed from the monkhood, but I am still doing something similar to the monk, but not 100% because I am no longer at the temple. Even though I do Buddhist services, there are some things that I can’t do, so for some of the ceremonies I invite monks from the temple to chant and help me.

As a somewhat amusing aside from these deeper questions about precepts, ordination, and the military chaplain’s place in this discussion, several participants noted wryly that regardless of ordination, military service was very similar to monastic life regardless.

The other thing that I felt brought me back was the whole military was just like a monastery. You go to bed, not going out at night, chow, everything always at the same time, very much like the monastery. You come in very much like an ordained monk.

Ultimately, while it is important that chaplains and monastics engage with the formal demarcation of the differing types of ordination and the responsibilities towards both one's home tradition and the precepts received, the participants in this study all held that this had limited impact on the role or function of the chaplain, especially in the relationship and responsibilities between the chaplains and those they served.

In my community, they called me a twenty-first century monk. I told them I'm learning from my master, but he has a different way, and I have my own skillful means, a different way to conduct my business. I'm bringing Buddhism into society. When I went to school, I wore civilian outfits, and then when I go to the temple I wear my Buddhist robes. When I'm at school I try to be a good student, and when I'm at home I try to be a good son and brother. In the temple I try to be a good master. For my role in society and in the military, I have to be the right person in the right place at the right time. I cannot be a master at school. At school I am a student. I cannot be a chaplain in society. I can't say, "Hey I'm a chaplain so I can drive however I want." I cannot be that crazy person. But my community respects me, even when I wear my civilian clothes. They still bow and respect me not because of what I'm wearing, but because of who I am.

### **Theme C: Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings**

**Table 4.C: Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Angulimāla	5	
Avalokiteśvara	3	
Bodhisattva Path	4	
Buddha as Chaplain	2	
Buddha Nature	1	
Buddhist Teachings – General	14	
Buddhist Teachings – Figures	6	
Buddhist Teachings – Principles	15	
Buddhist Teachings – Scriptural References	27	
Buddhist Texts	12	
Eightfold Path	6	
Emptiness	6	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Troops	6	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Four Noble Truths	4	
Gratitude	2	
Help According to Needs	1	
Jataka	2	
Khsitagharba / Earth Store Bodhisattva	2	
Mahayana	13	
Medicine Buddha	1	
Middle Path	3	
Pratimoksha	5	
Rahula	1	
Suffering	31	
Tathagata / Suchness	2	
Theravada	8	
Three Characteristics – World Suffering	1	
Three Poisons	1	
Three Practices	1	
Three Purifications	1	
Three Refuges – Helping Troops	2	
Triple Gem	1	
Upaya – Helps Troops	1	
Upaya – Support Military Despite Precepts	2	
Zen	2	
Zhiyi	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
36	195	<b>Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings</b>

The third theme surrounds the Buddhist doctrines and teachings which the chaplains use, both in supporting those they serve as well as what grounds them and their work. This theme focuses more on the chaplain's own internal understanding as opposed to the teachings that are openly used when interacting with troops or conducting religious

services. Instead, this theme explored how the chaplains understanding themselves and their work in the context of their military service through their Buddhist beliefs.

Most of the chaplains mentioned beliefs surrounding what are usually considered to be both the core teachings and the introduction to pan-Buddhist tradition. This included the Triple Gem, the Three Refuges, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path. As one chaplain stated,

I still relate with the Five Precepts and keep the Five Precepts myself. You know *sila*, concentration, wisdom, that is how we grow.<sup>170</sup> You have *sila*, the concentration and the wisdom, in the Eightfold Path. If you have the Right Wisdom, you have the Right View and the Right Intention, and if you keep the precepts then you have Right Speech – no lying no misconduct, Right Action, Right Intention, Right Livelihood, and so on. So, I brought them the Five Precepts and the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path.

Most of the chaplains interviewed also discussed suffering and the potential for liberation as a key component of both their understanding and their work.

The Four Noble Truths, that's the foundation and the framework of my ministry because of suffering and what triggers the suffering in them. Is it because of their relationships or finances, or because of the high tempo or the command team, or because of their immediate supervisor or leader who puts a lot of stress and pressure on them. So, I have to identify it and listen to them and help them deal with that stress. The Four Noble Truths is the foundation of my work.

Several other foundational doctrines were mentioned but not fully explored by multiple participants. These included the teachings of the Three Practices, Three Poisons, the Three Characteristics, and the Middle Path. Several Mahayana chaplains also mentioned the practice of *upaya* or skillful means and how it applied to their understanding of their role as military chaplains.

I can use Buddhist teachings as a foundation for me in how to use skillful means to help them and respond to their needs. For example, I can use the *Lotus Sutra*

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<sup>170</sup> *Sila*: Moral practice, i.e. following the precepts.

and *Universal Door* in the *Lotus Sutra* as a foundation for my work. I can open the door for them and listen to them and care for them and show compassion to them. I also listen to their suffering and identify what they need in the moment.

The above quote mentions the *Lotus Sutra*, which was the most common scripture referenced by the Mahayana chaplains, with an almost equal amount of discussion of the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*. One chaplain referred to the “stories from the Nikaya,” a large division of sutras within the Pali canon. Non-sutra texts within the Buddhist tradition which were also mentioned included the Jataka Tales and the *Therigatha*, a collection of enlightenment verses from Buddhist nuns.

There were several spiritual figures who were also mentioned by the chaplains. Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, was mentioned most often. One chaplain spoke of Khsitagarba, the Earth Store Bodhisattva of the underworld, likening this figure to a common saying in Western culture when it comes to war,

There are very good historical examples of army leaders using the term “War is hell.” I look at that and say, “War is hell,” and the Earth Store Bodhisattva goes to hell to save beings who are right there. To help them out of that, why shouldn’t I do that for the people who are suffering through this hell? And so that informs my work. They are in a certain hell, and I am here to help them, to help them minimize the suffering that they and others are going through so that they don’t overindulge in that pain and suffering.

Other figures who were mentioned included Marici, both a deva and bodhisattva, who was a “powerful symbol” for both women service members and warriors in general, and Rahula, the Buddha’s son, who perfected the practice of purifying the mind.

One figure, which was mentioned by both Theravada and Mahayana chaplains as a key focal point in their understanding of military service writ large, was Angulimala, one of the Buddha’s original disciples and former criminal and murderer. One chaplain recounted a variation of the story of Angulimala,

You may have heard the story about a Buddhist monk called Angulimala. Before he became a monk, he was a student for someone else, so he killed people and collected their fingers. He tried to kill 1000 people to get their fingers. He killed more than that but could not collect their fingers. Then, when he collected almost 1000 fingers, the Buddha saw him. He was about to kill his own mother when the Buddha came to him. The Buddha said that even though he did not have the intention to harm or kill other people, Angulimala had still killed all those people, so he needed to accept reality and leave that life behind. Sort of like if you go out to the field, you'll get dirty. Do you feel guilty about getting dirty or are you going to take responsibility and clean up and move on?

The overall theme throughout all these quotations, whether they focused on scripture, doctrine, or spiritual figures, was how they applied to human suffering. Every chaplain interviewed, ultimately spoke about the Buddhist understanding of suffering. Suffering as suffering, as stress, or as dissatisfaction, and the chaplain's own motivation to meet the service members in that suffering was informed through Buddhist teachings. As one chaplain summarized this theme,

In military chaplaincy this is basically the foundation for being human, because with suffering there is nowhere to hide. Try to go in the air, no, try to hide in the sea, no, suffering follows you everywhere. There are qualities that can transform suffering. For Buddhists we believe in reincarnation and liberation through morality, concentration, and meditation, leading to wisdom.

#### **Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship**

**Table 4.D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Chaplain Relationship – Gives Balance	4	
Chaplain Relationship – Military is Deficient	6	
Chaplain Relationship to Institution	12	
Command Relationship – Contention	5	
Command Relationship – General	16	
Command Relationship – Positive	3	
Culture Clash – Home Tradition vs. Military	3	
Legal Role of Chaplains / Constitution / Rights	2	
Office Work	1	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Self-Directed Duties	3	
Troop Morale – For Command	5	
Warfighting Readiness – Creates Stress	1	
Warfighting Readiness – General	3	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
13	64	<b>Daily Activities and Command Relationship</b>

With this understanding of who the chaplains are and the spiritual foundations which inform their military service, the next theme focuses on what this service looks like on a day-to-day basis. Before moving on however, a note should be made about the data from the rest of the structural themes, and is something which might have been noticed prior to this as well. Phenomenological methodology was used in order to show the granularity in chaplaincy experience. Especially in the following themes, many similarities will be noted, with a potential accompanying feeling of homogeneity. This topic will be discussed in *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*, however a few points to keep in mind at this juncture is that military structures in general are designed to create homogeneity among its members. There are many reasons for this, including troop morale, consistency of mission orientation, and the ability to move individuals between different physical locations without prolonged retraining periods. All of this is further impacted by the enculturation that can take place within a semi-closed system like the military. For example, civilians are not free to enter military bases and military members have limited interaction with civilians while carrying out their normal duties. The stereotype is that militaries want to create people who immediately follow orders without question, and homogeneity among schedule, clothing, and standards of conduct, among a

great many other things, helps promote this uniformity.<sup>171</sup> The offshoot of this, however, is a larger level of similarity, especially in the daily duties and interactions of military chaplains than might otherwise be found in the civilian sector where such stringent codes of behavior do not necessarily exist. Greater variation will soon be discovered in the textual themes later in this chapter. This is primarily because the textual themes focus on thought processes and understandings, rather than external behaviors, and therefore chaplains have a greater leeway of diversity within a military context compared to the purely structural themes explored here.

Throughout the interviews, the chaplains expressed all having very similar roles and responsibilities within the military, regardless of branch. These responsibilities can be broken down into three major categories succinctly summed up with one chaplain's comment about his daily activities,

The responsibility of the Chaplain Corps is to provide for your own community, the Buddhist community, and facilitate for other groups. Second, provide care and spiritual counseling, and then give command advice on the ethics, morality, or religious cultures in different places.

The first category expressed above about caring for one's religious community is the foundation for all chaplaincy in the US military. This is the free exercise of religion.

In line with law and certain supreme court decisions talking about what chaplains do, we are supposed to be a constitutionally permissible accommodation of an individual's free exercise of rights, that's what we're supposed to be. I am supposed to be facilitating their free exercise...I let my peers know that US Code

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<sup>171</sup> Those who challenge external uniformity are usually not allowed to remain in the military, even if the military eventually acknowledge such challenges. HM2 Sims, who I once interacted with at Ft. Sam Houston, TX, was discharged from the US Navy due to her black-coded hairstyle, despite the Navy later authorizing such hairstyles in response to her discharge. Meghann Myers, "Officials Decide to Boot HM2 for Her Locks," *Navy Times*, August 21, 2014, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2014/08/21/officials-decide-to-boot-hm2-for-her-locks/>. For internal or ethical conflicts, the only options in the US military are to follow an order now and question it later, or, as an officer, resign your commission at this very moment – thus allowing someone else to carry out the order. Joint Service Committee on Military Justice, *Manual for Courts-Martial United States*, IV-24, IV-25.

7217 obligates chaplains to conduct a weekly religious service even if it is not part of our tradition.

These weekly services were the most visible form of this free exercise of religion, and what this service looks like will be discussed in more detail in *Theme E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship*, below. The next major category of routine activity for military chaplains was troop support, ranging from individual counseling to larger group activities. This type of support was usually self-directed with the chaplains having mostly free movement throughout the command.

Every day we helped all the soldiers. I counseled, offered spiritual guidance, and helped them. They made appointments one-to-one and talked about any problems with family or any military problems. I helped them and then on Sunday we performed my Buddhist service or asked other chaplains to come and do mass or other services from other traditions for the soldiers, and that's every day. We all had different schedules, but I always met with soldiers wherever they were, worked with them, talked with them, that is how a chaplain spends a normal day.

Even as duties and responsibilities increased for the troops around them due to operational necessity, the chaplains reported being right alongside their troops.

Sometimes we had high-op tempo (high operational tempo). We call this being "ready to fight and win the nation's wars." That is the mission, and this goes down to the unit level. The unit needs to be ready, and this means you must prepare all the vehicles and all the training. They all need to qualify with their weapons to be ready. Also supplies must be ready, and so in a high-op tempo from reporting to duty in the morning at 0630 for meetings and physical training, till later at 1700 or 1800, we're still working.

Discussing the daily routine of life aboard ship, one Navy Chaplain voiced a similar arrangement,

In the morning around 7-7:30, we have a department head meeting. After that we do our ministry. We have a lot of counseling, and provide ministry of presence, walking around the ship and visiting people. We give people one-to-one counseling, as well as training. We might have an opportunity to do a 5-minute Reset the Mind or Word of the Day. We work until probably midnight, and

before midnight we do an evening prayer on the ship and then after the evening prayer it's time to relax. Evening prayer is around 10:00 at night.

For larger evolutions, one chaplain recounted developing counseling programs for service members and their families, independent family support for when their loved ones were deployed, and even financial training.

The final major category for chaplain activity was in advising the overall command of troop morale and troop perceptions of both the mission and leadership. This included serving as a moral counterweight for the command as well. Advising the command usually took the form of attending higher-level briefings with the command staff.

A couple times a week we have a command staff brief and the chaplain is part of the command staff. As the chaplain, I along with other members, brief the command team about what my role as a chaplain is, what is going on in the battalion, and what morale seems like as a whole. I share with the whole command team, from the battalion level to the company level, what is going on and what solutions I can give to the formation and command team, and ask them to execute certain things to boost the morale of the unit.

It was during these interactions that several chaplains voiced the need for clear moral principles and discussed their own use of pastoral authority. As one chaplain stated,

It very much helps that I'm stubborn because I have been in so many units where the leadership or certain senior ranking leaders will come in and say, "We need killers," and I say, "No you don't – no you don't need killers, you need warriors." Know the difference and know when it's appropriate and when it's not appropriate to kill. They tend to like killers, and I have to sit there and make sure that I am combating that to ensure that they are still doing things morally and ethically, in as moral and ethical a way as best and as often as I possibly can.

Another chaplain, also speaking on the role of the chaplain regarding military missions and attitudes stated,

We have to be careful of the language we use, and we have to be aware of what is the purpose of having a Buddhist chaplain in the military. Even if you are an officer and you're in the meeting and hear about tactics and plans to attack, we need to be aware that we are not to give any advice, or feel happy, or help them attack. No, we should not say that. We better keep silent, quiet, be a mindful presence.

This statement reflects almost verbatim the military regulations discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, that states chaplains are not to be involved in any type of military planning, though here it is reflected in moral principles rather than in the legal regulations which were created to preserve the chaplain's status as a non-combatant.

As seen above, several chaplains viewed themselves as fulfilling the role of educator to the command about what a chaplain's responsibilities are. This points to a belief among some chaplains that commands are sometimes unclear about a chaplain's ultimate role, and this lack of clarity has caused tension between the chaplains and other service members at some duty stations.

Every unit is going to be a little bit different, but most units are going to see all chaplains. Most units kind of use their chaplains as either the morale officer, which under Army regulations we cannot be the morale officer, and this is much much much much much more common, they see us as behavioral health adjuncts, as like an extra set of hands for the behavioral health world, which is also not our job, but that's what commanders want, so that's what commanders get...So I spend half my day doing that, and I spend half my day doing essentially plans for morale events.

This comment speaks to a deeper tension about what the role of spiritual care is, especially in the psychological world where historically there has been a strict divide between psychological therapy and spirituality, a divide which civilian chaplains in some sectors have been actively trying to close in recent years.<sup>172</sup> The frustration in this

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<sup>172</sup> William Miller and Kathleen Jackson, *Practical Psychology for Pastors* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 10.

comment also points to the stringent hierarchies and tradition of obedience to the chain of command within military environments, something which limits a chaplain's actions and, as will be discussed in the textual themes below, may sometimes impact a chaplain's engagement with the First Precept.<sup>173</sup> Prior to that discussion, however, with an understanding of both the general duties and the potential obstructions chaplains sometimes encounter, the direct relationship between the service members and the chaplains can now be explored.

### **Theme E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship**

**Table 4.E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acceptance / Letting Go	24	
Compassion to Troops – Normal Stressors	7	
Daily Duties	30	
Direct Danger	1	
Finances	3	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Trauma	3	
Four Brahma Viharas – For Troops	6	
Help Others Find Meaning	19	
Individual Counseling	44	
Mental Health / Moral Injury	20	
Military Sexual Trauma	1	
Mindfulness – General	3	
Mindfulness – Troop Care	8	
Need Reason / Intellect	1	
Power – Chaplain Officer vs. Enlisted	3	
Religious Service	9	
Ritual – Individual Troop Care	1	

<sup>173</sup> As an enlisted member of the Navy, I attended several MWR (Morale, Wellness, and Recreation) events, such as basketball tournaments, Steel Beach Picnics (food on an aircraft carrier's flightdeck), and bingo nights, which were always attended by the chaplains. It is therefore easy to understand the frustration if such events were my major obligation as a chaplain.

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Ritual / Religious Service	7	
Three Refuges Helping Troops	2	
Troop Morale – For Troops	13	
Upaya – Helps Troops	1	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
21	206	<b>Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship</b>

The previous theme explored the overarching guidelines and parameters for a chaplain's daily activities. This theme will now focus in on the chaplain's direct relationship with the primarily enlisted members of their service branch, with a focus on three primary areas. The first area to explore is how these chaplains were perceived as representing a religious minority by the service members who grew up in a primarily Christian society. This will then lead to a discussion of the chaplain's role in mental health and how chaplains are seen in relationship to behavioral health. Finally this theme will examine the dedicated spiritual interventions used by chaplains.

### **Representing Buddhism**

From a religious perspective, the United States is a predominantly Christian nation, and the chaplains first reflected on how they forged connections with their troops while coming from a minority religious tradition. The chaplains were also aware of the power dynamic between the chaplains as military officers when it came to interacting with enlisted service members. This could nominally afford them the opportunity to impress their own views on others, an idea which all the chaplains were both aware of and firmly rejected.

They know that I am Buddhist, and that can also stop me and stop them from opening up with me and engaging with what is going on with them in the moment, because as a chaplain we have higher rank as officers and whatever I share with them they have to listen because they are enlisted. Sometimes that is not an effective way to help them deal with their issues.

The chaplains came up with unique solutions for ensuring that all those under their purview were included in the support the chaplain offered and that no one was alienated from them. They transformed the appearance of Buddhist teachings in such a way as to make them accessible to everyone who came to them.

Mostly they were really into meditation, I called them relaxation techniques. I don't really teach exclusive to Buddhism, since we say that we affirm and provide. We serve all soldiers, so we don't say I serve only Buddhists. No, they are all soldiers regardless of belief or non-belief, and we still serve them all equally. Everyone can relate to relaxation. I don't use the name karma or *sila* or Buddhist wisdom, but I do say virtue, concentration, wisdom. Any soldier can relate to that. I don't say God or Buddha, I say, "The Lord," so anyone can have their own lord. I offer them to anyone who wants to learn the strategies, the mental and physical strategies to deal with stress and anxiety while they are in the service.

Despite this emphasis on meeting others where they were and not imposing religion-specific ideas on others, the military uniform of the chaplain clearly identified their religious tradition. Given the low number of Buddhist chaplains in the military, the chaplain's own oddity sometimes helped to open doors for them.

I have quite a number of soldiers in the behavioral health ward and when I introduce myself as a chaplain they turned their head away, but then they are curious about my insignia, and I say I'm a Buddhist chaplain, and they turn around and talk to me. Because I don't tell them about the teachings of the Buddha, they come and ask me themselves, and I can ask them and guide them to their understanding of their meaning and their purpose and their values.

The limited mainstream understanding of what constitutes Buddhism and being a Buddhist was something which remained clear in the minds of the chaplains, as some of their service members had limited encounters with Buddhism in the past. The chaplains

were able to incorporate and work with these viewpoints even when they may have been somewhat different from traditional concepts of being Buddhist.

They come to me and say they are Buddhist, but they are not actually Buddhists from a traditional perspective. From the traditional perspective, Buddhists are the ones who take refuge in the Three Jewels and take the Five Precepts. But the ones who identify as Buddhists, they find that Buddhism is cool and that it doesn't relate to God, or Buddhism is more spiritual and so that is why they connect with it and call themselves Buddhists. They read or listen to the Dalai Lama's teachings, and they enjoy it, so they say, "Yeah I'm Buddhist." For those people, they come to me, and I share with them the teachings directly.

In whatever way the connections with the service members were formed, the chaplains all engaged with the stresses and challenges the service members faced. These stressors were common to all the chaplains and their differing branches of service.

Many soldiers not only medically struggle from military training, trying to pass physical education, but also financial issues, family issues. When I was on the Reserve side, four or five soldiers were basically homeless and lived in their cars. They would come and talk to me about how their families are really broken. A lot of things, some of them joined the Army to try and escape from their family. There was a big need, and I would see a lot of tears.

The chaplains would often offer individual counseling when encountering service members facing this type of suffering, and as described in *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*, this individual counseling comprised a significant portion of the chaplain's regular duties. During these encounters, the chaplains recounted using Buddhist techniques to help in calming and addressing the stressors of military service in addition to verbal pastoral counseling.

I also do breathing techniques and mindfulness from Buddhist tradition, like body scanning. I introduce these practices and techniques to the soldiers. Sometimes they come in and are very stressed and I invite them to do some breathing first, because when they're stressed it is hard for them to tell me what they need to, or what is going on. It helps them center down and be able to articulate what they need in that moment.

### **Daily Activities and Mental Health**

Post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) is a common form of suffering in the military, and some chaplains found their practices to be useful in mitigating its impact. “For PTSD I will use the teaching of emptiness and letting go, to be able to breathe in and let go, to feel this body and then let go of the perceptions.” These practices were also used in a more formal capacity to address several different types of individual complaints.

The religious goal of Buddhism is to be free from suffering. Therefore, as Buddhist chaplains, we can apply Buddhist doctrine to meet the needs of communities by using mindfulness as a healing tool. Mindfulness could be used as a tool in the treatment of mental illness symptoms such as stress, distress, chronic pain, anxiety, and anger management. Not only can this heal us from stress, anxiety, depression and anger, but also it can help us develop peaceful states of mind and resilience, and prevent future stress, distress, anxiety and depression.

As mentioned earlier, while there is some tension about the chaplain’s role in responding to mental health disorders, most of the chaplains interviewed expressed having worked with mental illness. Moral injury, where a person either does or has done to them actions which directly contradict their own deepest values, was an area which was often described by the chaplains as especially suited for spiritual interventions.

While the term ‘moral injury’ is a modern invention, it is not a new phenomenon.

I look at the modern definition of moral injury, the contraction between core values and actions, and now try to use the term moral injury to explain the whole incidence. Moral injury doesn’t just happen in modern times, it happened back in the Buddha’s time and before that. In the Buddha’s time we have Angulimala.

In addressing moral injury, the participants all pointed towards transforming the traumatic event into one which provided meaning. While the new type of meaning was

not always certain, the emphasis was always on transformation, rather than continued recrimination.

From my understanding of Buddhism, I have a framework to help someone with that. It's called moral injury, because the soldier killed an enemy and that also violates or contradicts his own core values, which creates a moral dissonance and moral injury. As a chaplain with compassion, I help that soldier and I provide support and an environment for that soldier to process and transform that kind of injury.

### **Daily Activities and Spiritual Interventions**

Throughout all these support activities the chaplains utilized Buddhist teachings to inform their own behaviors and understandings, and often offered Buddhist inspired techniques or interventions with or without their Buddhist labels. However, it was during the weekly Buddhist religious service that the chaplains were able to engage in their most distinctly "Buddhist" activity. The chaplains all followed a similar outline for their religious services, "Normally the service will start with chanting, prayers to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Then a Dharma talk, meditation and reflection, and then a conclusion." Pali was the most common chanting language among the chaplains, with both Chinese and Japanese being mentioned. One chaplain offered a more opened-ended style of service which incorporated multiple Buddhist traditions,

We start out with the lighting of the candles and incense, then the three bows, followed by the initial or opening chanting which I tend to pull from the Pali. After we do the chanting I open it up to everyone else, if they have any particular chant from their own tradition that they want to include. Then we'll move into meditation, followed by a Dharma reading and a Dharma talk, and then we close out with chanting and three bows.

This chaplain also explored the value of ritualistic activities and shared how these rituals were used for individual support, to help those service members facing burdens which may not be appropriate or comfortable to share in a group setting.

I do purification ceremonies for those who find themselves sullied by whatever actions that have been done to them or they have engaged in. Consolatory rituals for those who have passed, purification rituals for those who in some way, shape, or form, feel unclean, or who know they have done something or had some kind of moral failure. The ceremony itself is heavily symbolic. I will open with a chanting section. Then there is a nice little section where they get a chance to state whatever happened to them, whatever they did, whatever seems to have made them dirty. Following that I will invoke or bring to their awareness certain spiritual figures as inspiration for aid. I usually reserve this piece for those who have undergone some sort of sexual trauma, where I will have a bowl of water where I have poured some powdered incense into it to sort of ritually purify it, and I will sprinkle that on them using a very special dedicated purificator whisk that will symbolically and ritually cleanse them.

This ongoing relationship with the chaplains' fellow service members, sometimes through formal or informal means, sometimes overtly Buddhist and sometimes only informed by Buddhist values and practices, formed probably the greatest concentration of meaning and purpose for military service among those interviewed.

One interesting note concerned who exactly the chaplains were working with. There is a strict hierarchical divide in the military between enlisted members and officers, with each group holding its own internal sub-cultural within each given military branch. While chaplains are available for everyone who wears the uniform, officer and enlisted, except for the command staff briefings already discussed in the previous theme, none of the chaplains interviewed spoke directly about supporting officers as a separate function. As demonstrated in this theme, there is clear discussion of supporting enlisted members, and it would be safe to assume to that the same type of support and the same the type of needs – relationships, finances, career decisions and work stress – were all present within

the officer corps. However, none of the chaplains offered examples or brought up relationships with officers as care recipients.

Ultimately, whether officer or enlisted, it was not the military institution, but rather the human beings behind the rank and uniform which the chaplains cared most about. As one chaplain unequivocally stated,

I am not here for the Army. I am not here for the military. I could care less about both of those entities. I am here 100% solely to take care of the human beings who are in the military and to see if I can make sure that they are acting in a moral and ethical fashion, that they have that Right Intent and that their actions can be Right Action.

#### **Theme F: Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains**

**Table 4.F: Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Americans Aren't Real Buddhists	2	
Buddhist Chaplains Uncommon	4	
Buddhists Get Respect / Curiosity	3	
Challenges	5	
Chaplain Growth	8	
Christian Hegemony – Fight Against	2	
Christian Hegemony – Work with It	5	
Cultural Clash	3	
Culture Clash – Buddhism vs. Western Religions	1	
Diversity – General	18	
Diversity – Helped Understand Buddhism More	2	
Educate Others About Buddhist Chaplaincy	8	
Karma – Individual – Chaplain	8	
Penance / Responsibility for Military	6	
Religious Hegemony	11	
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Chaplains	3	
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Command	10	
Religious Tensions in Military vs. Troops	15	
Ritual – Selfcare	1	
Selfcare	3	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Spiritual Growth – General	2	
Spiritual Growth – None Happened	1	
Spiritual Growth – Other Cultures Help Faith	2	
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Broaden Views	1	
Spiritual Growth – Other Religions Help Faith	2	
Want More Buddhist Community / Isolated	6	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
26	132	<b>Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains</b>

As discussed in the last theme, Buddhist chaplains are part of a minority religious tradition in the armed forces, which required different methods of engaging with members of non-Buddhist traditions. This naturally leads to the question of how their relationship with those steeped in predominantly Christian viewpoints and mindsets impacted the Buddhist chaplains in their work, including their relationship with their non-Buddhist chaplain peers. This theme will explore the question of interfaith cooperation starting with the positive experiences which were shared by many of the chaplains. Surprisingly, the second area of exploration was originally expected to be its own theme and focused on the chaplain's own spiritual growth. However, almost all discussions that the chaplains provided which referenced their own spiritual growth took place within the context of interfaith dialogue, and so the personal growth of the Buddhist chaplain is also included here. The final area of discussion in this theme will focus on the tensions that were felt between the Buddhist chaplains and those of other faith traditions, though these tensions were usually experienced indirectly.

### Positive Interfaith Support

Most of the comments in this theme are positive, and when asked about specific people in other faith traditions, the responses were usually supportive. However, as conversations began to shift to larger systemic trends and the overall feeling tone of being in the military, these positive viewpoints began to show some cracks. While relevant challenges are discussed here, a more in depth discussion of the overall burdens of Buddhist chaplains in the military are primarily reserved for *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*.

Buddhism was so uncommon in the US military that at the beginning of one chaplain's career there was not even the option to declare oneself as a member of a Buddhist faith tradition.

We turned in our packages to become Buddhist chaplains. At that time, they asked me what my religion was, and I said Buddhist, and they said, "Buddhist, what is that? We don't have that option. I can put you as non-denomination or no religion or Christian." And I said, "No sir, I'm here to be a Buddhist chaplain." When I turned in my package at first my dog tags didn't have any religion on it.

Despite the overall unfamiliarity with Buddhism in the military, most of the chaplains interviewed had primarily positive interactions with chaplains from other faith traditions. These positive interactions sometimes began before the chaplain joined the military.

The first time I came to the US my schoolteachers were Christian and Catholic, and not Buddhist, but they were open, and they help me tremendously. They took care of me and taught me so well, so with that gratitude I wanted to serve with people from different faiths and different backgrounds in this country.

For some of the chaplains, these positive interactions continued into their military careers.

Soldiers called me, “Father,” including my battalion company commander. Even today we are still really good friends. He was one of my references for active duty. He was a devoted Catholic and he would call me, “Father,” and every time we would go out he would pay for me as an offering.

These positive interactions usually extended to all those in a given command, with one chaplain recounting, “as a Buddhist monk I got a lot of respect from the soldiers, especially if they know that you are an ordained minister.” These interactions were often of two-way benefit, with the Buddhist chaplains learning about themselves and deepening their own understanding and application of Buddhist teachings.

Interacting with people from different traditions helped me strengthen my faith, helped me understand more about the teachings of the Buddha, and helped me understand more about who I am. This all helped me understand more about my own negative habits.

### **Spiritual Growth Through Religious Diversity**

Through interfaith and multicultural interactions, many of the chaplains interviewed appeared to have similar experiences. This highlighted one unique aspect of the Buddhist chaplain community at this period in history. With many of the chaplains coming from Asian communities which highly respect monastics, and with the chaplains mostly being prior monastics before their military service, the people they interacted with in their home communities appear to have been more reticent in exploring or challenging the erstwhile monastics in their viewpoints or behavior. With the mystique of monkhood now being shifted in this new military environment, several of the chaplains experienced unexpected growth. One chaplain stated,

When dealing with the Buddhist population, people look up to me as a monk and respect me, so there is a different way of talking to people from different backgrounds that helps me understand more about myself.

This growth and self-awareness enhanced the chaplains' ability to engage in selfcare which simultaneously improved their ability to care for those in their command. This ability to engage in selfcare often stemmed from a foundation of appreciation for difference.

It makes me feel grateful for what I am doing and proud of who I am, so they don't need to believe what I believe, and they don't need to practice what I practice. We can meet in the middle as service members and also as human beings. When I help them, sometimes I help myself. When I see a soldier come to me and they are suffering, but when they walk out and they are smiling, that makes me feel better too. That is what motivates me to do my job.

Finally, several of the participants explored how the simple act of being in the military allowed them to better understand the burdens of all military members, having now shared in it themselves. This shared experience allowed the chaplains to display greater understanding and provide greater efficacy in helping others.

Before I did not have direct experience of serving in the military. I heard from people and only had an indirect experience, but now I have direct experience. So direct experience gives something different. For me, now that I have the experience myself and I understand more than what I just heard from people.

### **Religious Tensions**

Through these interactions many chaplains report having had positive experiences when encountering difference during their military service. While many of these experiences were positive and assisted the chaplains in their own spiritual and professional growth, some chaplains encountered challenges, ranging from the personal to the systemic, especially when dealing with religion. This friction usually stemmed from a fundamentally different understanding of the role of religion in a person's life. As one chaplain recounted,

I'm happy I'm still Buddhist. There is only me as a Buddhist chaplain with 47 other military chaplains who are all from Christian backgrounds. One thing that I learned they opposed was when the Army came out with new regulations called "Holistic Health and Fitness." In that, there is a spiritual domain that says spirituality gives a sense of connection to all people to help them identify their own values, belief, purpose, and meaning for their lives. A majority of Christian chaplains oppose that idea, because they received a calling from God to spread the gospel. They have to save people. They think people can't choose for themselves what their meaning is. For Buddhists, we don't have that concept, so that is why it is easy for us to engage with soldiers from different faiths, different religions, and different perspectives. They are happy to receive me, and I see the way that I influence them without telling them, "Hey, you have to listen to me as a Buddhist chaplain."

As has been described in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, this attitude that a Christian chaplain's belief unassailably overrides anyone else's rights or liberties has been mirrored in the US Navy as well.<sup>174</sup> This points to a key difference in outlook, namely whether the chaplains believe they have the whole truth and all others must conform to their espoused doctrines, or whether a person can be whole and spiritually unified independent of a supernatural other. As will be discussed in the textual themes focusing on the First Precept, this idea that a person is able to determine their own values and meaning in life without a supernatural-other forms a prime component of how the chaplains view morality and by extension their engagement with the First Precept, both for themselves and in their support of others.

Returning to the realm of interfaith exchange, another chaplain was more pronounced in his viewpoint on Christian hegemony within the military, and his own efforts to counteract it within his own sphere of influence.

I will not do religious services on the weekend simply for the fact that that was a way of oppressing us as Buddhist for a very very long time, since we would not be allowed to practice if we were not doing the good Christian thing and just

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<sup>174</sup> Tilghman, "Chaplain Faces Possible Discharge."

worshiping on Sundays like everybody else. I won't do services on the weekend, period. I'm not going to continue the cycle of oppression.

This chaplain is remarking on the overarching influence of Christianity that has influenced almost every aspect of what modern chaplaincy is assumed to be in military chaplaincy.<sup>175</sup> This can be seen from the requirement for endorsement and ordination, modeled on Christian understandings of what a pastor's or minister's role and relationship to the faith community should be, to the idea that prayers must be said aboard ship, to the above chaplain being told that Christianity is the only available religious affiliation for military members, and to the 18 year gap between the first Navy Buddhist chaplain being commissioned in 2004 and the first Buddhist prayer flag being flown aboard ship during a Buddhist religious service in 2022.<sup>176</sup> These factors combine to indicate that almost all aspects of military chaplaincy have been geared towards Christian normative standards.<sup>177</sup> The predominance of Christianity cannot be understated. In discussing the impact of Christianity on his work as a Buddhist chaplain, one participant concluded,

It is still a Christian dominated country, and Christian culture is around every corner. Buddhist support would help bring our community together and also strengthen Buddhist practice in terms of the Bodhisattva Path.

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<sup>175</sup> Taylor Winfield, "Chaplaincy Work and Preparation Across Sectors," in *Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Wendy Cadge and Shelly Rambo, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 34-35.

<sup>176</sup> Lehrfeld, "Navy Flies Buddhist Flag." Navy regulations require that a prayer flag be flown during religious services above the national ensign by all ships at sea, bearing the religious symbol of the service being conducted. The Navy currently has Jewish, Christian, Buddhist and Islamic prayer flags.

<sup>177</sup> The reach of Christian hegemony not only applies to the military. In preparing for this doctorate, when writing about how Buddhist canonical tradition in Asia understands military service, I received significant pressure to include a major section about how Christians and Christianity view military service. The instructor was worried that Christians would "get mad" if they were not included in an internal school paper written for a Buddhist class about Buddhism at a Buddhist university. Even after I refused, I was still required to acknowledge Christian supremacy by including a section in my portfolio explaining why I was unwilling to conduct research about Christianity in my work about Buddhism for Buddhists.

For the Buddhist chaplains in this study, several other tensions were discovered which all had bearing on the First Precept and will be discussed below. This was somewhat surprising as the chaplains in this study did not mention any of the other challenges that military members often spoke to them about as ever impacting themselves, from being away from home, to financial burdens, to relationship issues, even when directly asked about them. As one chaplain stated,

For those who are financially suffering from material things, these are unavoidable, especially in the United States. You have all kinds of insurance you must pay off. You must support your family if you're not a monk. If you're a monk you must suffer material things too. You must travel, but monks suffer less compared to those who have families. You must feed your kids, you must get all this material ready, even to maintain a comfortable living in America, not a luxury living. It's very challenging.

This demonstrates some of the foundational and universally applicable teachings of Buddhism, that the monastic life is inherently less stressful than the homelife, for all the reasons which the chaplain described above. Instead of the more common stressors associated with military service, the biggest burden the chaplains expressed through different ways and with different understandings centered on the harm caused by the military and hence the Buddhist chaplain's own understanding and responsibility towards this harm. With a much clearer understanding of the background, context, and concerns of modern Buddhist military chaplains, a direct discussion may now take place about the textual themes surrounding the ultimate focus of this project, the First Precept of "Do not harm life."

## Textual Themes

The above structural themes have provided a context in which Buddhist military chaplains operate, including commonalities about their origins and home communities, daily responsibilities within their military service, and the spiritual impacts from belong to a minority religious tradition. With this context, this research can now turn to the specific research question of how chaplains understand their obligations towards the First Precept and the textual themes this discussion uncovered. In order to achieve this, the chaplains were all asked directly about their understanding of the First Precept and how they understood it to operate within the context of their military service. These understandings can be broken down into nine essential themes which include the chaplain's own personal actions, as well as how their precept practice manifested in their relationships with others and their interactions with military structures writ large. As with the structural themes, each key theme is presented here with a chart showing the code categories and the number of chaplain statements that were reviewed to form each theme. The themes are presented along with direct quotations from the chaplains.

### Theme 1: What is the First Precept?

**Table 4.1: What is the First Precept? (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acknowledge Killing – No	27	
Acknowledge Killing – Yes	27	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6	
Killing	45	
Mahayana	13	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Pratimoksha	5	
Theravada	8	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
9	196	<b>What is the First Precept?</b>

With the previous discussion of the scriptural foundation and definition of the First Precept, this first theme explores how the chaplains define the First Precept for themselves. This is important because, as mentioned in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, there has already been ample research on the canonical understandings of the First Precept, as well as a substantive volumes of literature about what Buddhists “should” or “should not” do in terms of precept practice, but there has been very little discussion of what those who are living out their practice actually understand about themselves. For many of the chaplains interviewed, their definition of the First Precept was very similar to the canonical definition. As one chaplain stated, “The First Precept is no killing.”

Other chaplains expanded on this definition,

Our First Precept in our tradition is not to kill any form of life, including animals. Including ants. If you intentionally kill an ant, even step on one, that requires you to have the intention to kill. It says that this is a minor offense by a monk and requires you to repent and ask forgiveness.

This chaplain brings up a key idea, that of intention, which will be discussed in *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship* below. Another point that is raised by this statement is the role of the actor, in this case a monk, and begs the question of whether this precept is different between monks and laity. Another chaplain expanded on this consideration,

I think you're a chaplain and are knowledgeable about the First Precept. In this situation I am really happy to see this precept of "Do not harm life" being talked about. Remember this First Precept is a little bit different for monks than for regular Buddhists because "Do not harm life" for monks means no killing of all living beings whatsoever, even in the car, even in the intention, no killing.

Here the ideas of both intention and the monastic-laity divide are brought up again. What this precept means for laity was more clearly laid out by another chaplain. This chaplain also brings up how this impacts the relationship between monastics and laity, which can be seen as mirroring the relationship between the chaplain and other military service members,

But then for other Buddhists if they do something for their livelihoods then that is what they have to do, and if you say, "Hey listen, no killing, and if you do you are not Buddhist," then they can't be Buddhist if they work at a company that makes food. If they must kill chickens or turkeys, then they can't be Buddhist, or they must quit their job. For all the people beside the monastics, they take the precept of "Don't kill other people" and try to avoid killing other beings for the practice of compassion. But if for their job they must kill animals, if that is the case, then we talk to them in person, but we do not say "Hey, you're a Buddhist, you took the precept, why are you working at that place? Go home, don't work, don't do this, don't do that." No, I'm not allowed to do that.

While this discussion veers away from killing other human beings which is the prime concern of this research, this comment begins to set up some of the nuance under which chaplains operate. This nuance is continued when another chaplain outlined that there is more to consider in terms of the First Precept than simply whether or not there was an act of killing.

They have qualifications in order for you to break the rules about killing in Buddhism. You need to meet those criteria. The first is that you need to be aware that the animal or the being you are going to kill is alive. Second you must have the intention to kill them. Third is you try to kill them. The fourth is you perform the action of killing, and the fifth one is the animal or person dies because of your action. These all must be completed in order for you to break the First Precept. If you have no intention, then basically your First Precept is not completely broken. It's not good, it's like it's damaged.

Precepts are behavioral rules, and so to fully break one is to perform an action which directly contradicts its instruction. Under this definition, only someone who performs a premeditated act of self-aware and intentional violence for the sake of violence would be considered to have fully broken the precept. As these chaplains have outlined, although certain actions may damage a precept, this does not banish someone beyond the reach or willingness of Buddhist chaplains and Buddhist tradition to help them. Within this type of ethical consideration, all factors, both internal and external, must be fully examined.

These definitions of the First Precept lay out several important considerations that must be kept in mind going forward. The first is the role of intention, already mentioned above. The second is that all the chaplains interviewed except one made a point of explaining that this precept is different for monastics than it is for laity, and therefore different for chaplains than for other military members. Due to this difference, the precept is not designed to judge other people's behavior. This idea that the precepts apply only to the chaplain will be further explored in *Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing*. Finally, this brief discussion of definitions also points out that holding or breaking a precept is not an absolute injunction, a black or white proclamation, on one's Buddhist practice or path, or even one's Buddhist affiliation. It is easy to view the precepts as strict, unfeeling moral rules which do not take intention, context, or impact into consideration, and that a single action will permanently sunder one from their religious community. While this is not the case, at the same time, this does not mean that the precepts are completely relative and can be excused away. The burdens which come

from being within the realm of violence, even if one does not directly kill others, and how to address these burdens, will also be discussed in the final theme of this section, *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*.

## Theme 2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm

**Table 4.2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Accept Real World – Still Killing	2	
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – Other Countries	2	
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – US	10	
Canonical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	1	
Canonical Precedence to Accept Killers	6	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
First Precept – Reduce Harm	12	
First Precept– Killing Can Be Justified	15	
Historical Government Influence on Buddhism	1	
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6	
Karma – Collective	12	
Killing	45	
Military Service Leads to Peace	1	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Condemn	2	
Not Responsible for Others – Social Norms	2	
Other Countries Have Buddhist Military	2	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
17	184	<b>Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm</b>

The next theme surrounding the First Precept centers on the most common view voiced by all the chaplains in this study. Regardless of what the First Precept states, killing still takes place in this world, militaries remain very real entities, and Buddhists

must accept this. To authentically engage with the First Precept requires chaplains to incorporate the reality of human violence into their precept practice. Speaking about human beings in general, one chaplain stated,

We basically cannot change them, that is my understanding. This is a kind of human nature. So sometimes I look at the Buddha's teaching and it is very true, the Three Poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance. This is true for all homo sapiens, from the time we used sticks and rocks to kill each other, to now when we use weapons to kill each other. For food, for territory or resources, even water.<sup>178</sup> If they want to occupy that, then they use a stick to kill each other, or a stone. So, this is kind of coded in our human DNA, to attack.

One of the chaplains even described how the Buddha, venerated as the most fully perfected human being of his time, or, doctrinally speaking, of all time, was unable to divert humans away from intrinsic violent tendencies.

I learned back in the Buddha's time that sometimes generals invited the lay disciples of the Buddha to join the troop formations and give a Dharma talk, and the Buddha allowed that venerable, that monk, to give a Dharma talk to the whole formation. He even allowed them to talk to the General, and the General himself went and worshiped and bowed to the Buddha, asking for the teachings. In the precepts there are several stories like this and that helped me understand that the Buddha tried to stop war a couple of times, but they were still fighting.

The truth of this statement has extended from the Buddha's time several thousand years ago to the world of today, and this was noticed and acknowledged by the chaplains in their specific line of work.

So, I think that for this we should look at the Soldier's Creed. "I stand ready to deploy, to engage, and to destroy the enemies of the United States of America." I stand ready to deploy, to engage, and to destroy. So, basically it's a machine that trains you to kill intentionally, to follow orders. So, this is a challenge for a Buddhist to see, so probably I have no answer for this.

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<sup>178</sup> It is interesting to note that even the Buddha himself was unable to prevent the war which traditionally is believed to have killed all the members of his home Shakya clan, a war that was fought over water rights. Mingun, *Great Chronicles*, 1362-1363.

This statement ends with the chaplain acknowledging that his presence in the army is not going to fundamentally shift the goals or means of such a large and entrenched institution as the US Army. Another chaplain echoed this view, stating,

So that reminds me of the Three Characteristics in Buddhism which are suffering, impermanence, and non-self. So, unless something changes in the military, the nation, or the policies, then it reminds me of this.

However, despite understanding that the military will neither change nor disappear in the real world, to reject the military and the people therein is also problematic. The chaplain walks the line between overt support or rejection of the military by taking on the role of a moral reminder that even in difficult situations, there are still deeper truths, such as the value of human life, which should not be forgotten even in the midst of more intense emotions. Speaking of the Four Brahma Viharas of kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, one chaplain noted,

Joyfulness is based on your love towards others. If you don't have that, how can you have joy? All you have is stress and disappointment and anger, those qualities. So, this is a very tough question, but for Buddhists we don't encourage violence, instead I try to find out what kind of solution can help them take the minimum number of lives and suffering.

Without the Buddha's teachings which are offered by the chaplains, there becomes less for the military members to hold on to in the face of military stressors. As these stressors increase, it becomes easier for those in the military to use deadly force as a response to their own internal suffering. The chaplain above acknowledges that violence will still occur, but as another chaplain continues, the First Precept is not disregarded.

This happens in all cultures. Regardless of whether you're in the military or not, the soldiers are still fighting, still killing each other, still killing enemies. So my role in the military is to help soldiers be aware of themselves more, and to help them understand their relationships and the value of human life. Help soldiers

understand the meaning of service, so whether they are engaged in combat or not, the message is still there. I help them understand the value of human life.

Here, the First Precept is voiced in positive terms rather than negative. Instead of not taking life, individuals do value life. The precept here is working to help other service members grow to understand the value of human life, any human's life, and through that teaching attempt to modify their behavior, even if violence still occurs. When violence does occur, the harm it causes will hopefully be minimized. This process occurs with a concurrent and ongoing understanding that even if it is minimized, harm is still harm.

This is reality, and we have to see reality just as it is – Tathagata is important.<sup>179</sup> If we're seeing things just as they are, we must understand that we live in an existence that is not always going to give us good options. Sometimes we must make the choice between all of the bad options and choose the one that is least bad. So, do we vow to refrain from the taking of life? Absolutely. We reflect well and heavily and very very carefully before doing that. Is there going to be some necessary loss in a war setting, yes. Can we minimize it? Yes, and we should.

All the chaplains interviewed acknowledged that the military and its accompanying violence are immutable realities in this world. They also acknowledged that they cannot change this, and yet nor can they abandon those who are in the military. One way in which to respond to these realities and obligations was by engaging their First Precept through the practice of minimizing harm by serving as a constant reminder to those around them of the value of human life and work with others to help grow this understanding.

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<sup>179</sup> Tathagata – the “suchness” or true nature of reality. While considered as beyond mundane understanding, it must necessarily include mundane understanding.

### Theme 3: Carrying Arms

**Table 4.3: Carrying Arms (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – Other Countries	2	
Buddhists Can Carry Arms – US	10	
Canonical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	1	
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2	
Carry Weapons – Others Carry Weapons	1	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Historical Precedence for Buddhists in Military	6	
Killing	45	
Mindfulness – Helps Killing	2	
Mindfulness – Helps Weapons	1	
Other Countries Have Buddhist Military	2	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
13	143	<b>Carrying Arms</b>

The third theme appeared in tandem with many of the chaplain's discussions of accepting violence and the military as part of the real world and centered on the role of carrying arms and the use of weapons. This theme involved two primary discussions, the first being the chaplain's own use, or lack thereof, of weapons. The second area which unexpectedly turned into a primary focus for Buddhist military chaplains is the suitability of chaplains using practices informed by Buddhist teachings to train service members in weapons use.

### Personal Weapons Use

The role of personal weapon use among the chaplains was universally voiced as inappropriate. When asked directly how one chaplain viewed his relationship with the First Precept, he responded,

That was one of the reasons I decided to join the military, because we don't touch guns, we don't carry a gun, and we don't fight. That's the beautiful work of a chaplain, otherwise I probably wouldn't have joined the military.

This sentiment was reflected several times by other chaplains as well and formed one of the generalities which the interviewees operated under. As another chaplain stated,

This reminds me of the people at the temple after I told them that I was going to join the Army. One of the temple disciples asked me if I was going to kill people, and I said no. I don't need to because my job is a chaplain. So based on regulations I don't need to fire any weapon, I don't need to touch any weapon. I don't need to harm anybody.

Here again is the understanding that carrying weapons and killing are viewed in the same way. This chaplain also mentions something brought up by several others, namely that regulations specifically prohibit chaplains from bearing arms as discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*. This refusal to handle weapons and viewing it as equal to maintaining the First Precept was reiterated by several chaplains and appeared to be held so closely that the following chaplain's stance on carrying weapons was challenged by other military members. The chaplain recounts a conversation with a sergeant,

I get that all the time myself, all the sergeants say if you're on the battlefield and your soldiers get killed and you see the weapon on the field, would you pick up the weapon and kill the enemy? And I say no, and they say how are you to protect your soldiers? And I say I can sacrifice myself, I can use my body to shield them, but I don't kill people, because my job here isn't killing. I still keep my precepts 100%, so with my intention and with my actions, and my speech, I still don't kill, period. So that is how I conduct my work over there.

This is a somewhat surprising conversation because the regulations about carrying arms apply to all chaplains of all religious traditions across all branches of service, and so anyone familiar with chaplains of any tradition should be familiar with this regulation. It is entirely possible that some service members new to the military may not be familiar with a chaplain's status as a non-combatant, but this above comment appears to imply that this question has been asked by many people many times. Furthermore, while "sergeant" can be a general term of an Army service member, the title implies a higher rank than simply "soldier," since to become any type of sergeant in the US Army requires a minimum of several years of service, enough time to become familiar with chaplains and their role. It therefore seems that this conversation implies that the sergeants were expecting a different answer and that in some other religious traditions or for certain other individual chaplains, the legal prohibition against all chaplains not bearing arms or engaging in combat may be viewed as a secondary consideration compared to other more deeply held personal beliefs or self-conceptions.

One chaplain recounted a moment of serious spiritual reflection upon his first introduction to the military as an enlisted member. This chaplain was working towards a position as a chaplain and became a victim of what many service members have encountered, a situation that occurs to such an extent that it has become a cliché. The recruiter lied to him.

I signed my name, and I got my date to go to boot camp. I had heard about boot camp, but I had never imagined that I would put myself in that situation where I was in boot camp. There, they asked me to touch weapons, and I said, "What? I didn't sign a contract to touch weapons. I'm a monk. I can't do that kind of thing." But they said I signed a contract so there is no way to back out and I said, "Really." And they said they signed me up, so I became a soldier.

Isolated within an environment which has been refined over centuries to compel obedience, this chaplain obeyed and qualified for weapons training. The fact that every member of the Army is required to go through this training and the chaplain was not enlisted in a combat role nor working with “live targets” meant that this chaplain did not consider these actions a violation of the First Precept, despite trying to avoid the situation in the moment. The understanding that most military members are not enlisted in frontline combat operations is a consideration which another chaplain brought up as well, reiterating that carrying weapons is not necessarily problematic in and of itself and that the First Precept can still be maintained in such a situation.

Many soldiers have jobs that don't kill people, so unless that is your job, your MOS, then it is a different kind of job.<sup>180</sup> Many people don't even touch a gun. They only touch one because they have to go for a weapon qualification twice a year, that's it. Other than that, they never touch weapons. Like for soldiers who work in a hospital. Right now, it is perhaps less than 10% that work on the frontline, on the battlefield, in the warzone. Even if they're there, they might not see combat or kill people.

### **Mindfulness and Weapons Training**

The above comments have posited that simply operating a weapon is not a violation of the First Precept as long as it is not in the context of harming another human being, in the same way that Buddhists can freely use knives to chop vegetables. All chaplains appeared unified on the view that weapons qualifications alone does not violate the First Precept for service members. A notable extension and subsequent tension

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<sup>180</sup> MOS – military jargon for “Military Occupational Specialty,” the specific vocational job which service members in the Army or Marines are trained for, ranging from cook, to radar operator, medic, to infantryman. Called “Rates” in the Navy and Coast Guard (not to be confused with “Rating” which denotes rank), and AFSC or “Air Force Specialty Code” in the Air Force.

between chaplain viewpoints, however, was discovered when exploring whether weapons use becomes inappropriate if the chaplain helps train others. This tension was introduced by one chaplain who stated,

That is a different story. I don't mind sharing it with you. Every six months soldiers must qualify and pass with the M-9 and M-4. If they don't, they must practice. It is not easy to qualify, and as I told you, everywhere that soldier goes, I go with them to motivate them, and to help them. So, I go with them to the weapons qualifications even though I don't touch the weapon at all whatsoever, since US military chaplains are not allowed to touch weapons. But then I told them if you concentrate and be mindful with every thought or every action, then you'll qualify. Control your breath. Breathe in, breathe out, and follow the instructions of your sergeant. It is easy. It was so easy because I did that, but I did not have the thought that the soldier is going to qualify to kill people, because they have to qualify to be soldiers. To get promoted they have to be qualified with weapons. That is their job, and my job is to help them, because if they are not qualified they cannot do anything.

The use of Buddhist practices by chaplains to assist troops in weapons training was not isolated to a single interviewee. Another chaplain recalled a similar situation, except that his experiences took place while he was an enlisted member of the military, prior to commissioning as a chaplain.

I learned a lot from the bottom up about the military, and I was like, "Oh, why did I get myself in this situation?" I conducted temple groups for meditation over there and helped all the soldiers, motivated them, taught them meditation. I did touch weapons at that time, and still qualified with the M-16 and all kinds of things, but I absolutely kept my precepts. I didn't kill any living beings, and then I helped all the people I could, using my concentration, my meditation, to help them get expert shooting qualifications.

The discussions presented by these chaplains appear to raise a specific question about ultimate responsibility. In these comments, a legalistic interpretation of the First Precept, whether the chaplain himself was directly killing another human being, coupled with an appeal to compassion and service, are presented as a reasonable expression of the First Precept in a military context.

The viewpoint that it is not problematic to use Buddhist mindfulness practices to assist soldiers in better using their weapons was not universally expressed. Speaking directly about this topic, and with a clear pronouncement as it relates to the precepts, another chaplain stated,

I would suggest to any Buddhist chaplain, especially when they lead meditation, do not teach soldiers how to be better at shooting. Only use mindfulness meditation techniques to help. If it's how to focus and shoot, no, it is a no go according to the precepts. We shall use mindfulness to help them understand oneself and understand what exactly hurts you mentally and spiritually.

For this chaplain, it is categorically inappropriate to teach soldiers how to better use weapons and to do so is in direct contention with the First Precept. These comments therefore show a difference in opinion about whether chaplains can be said to hold no responsibility for the violence conducted by the military if they are actively helping soldiers to learn to use the weapons which will enact that violence. If the First Precept can still be maintained if one carries weapons, can still be maintained if one trains with weapons, and can still be maintained if one trains others in the use of weapons, then at what point does it become problematic? For the chaplain above, the simple response is to not start down this avenue to begin with. For other chaplains, the response to this question of responsibility appeared to hinge primarily on why the soldiers were undergoing such training in the first place and what the intention behind such exercises were. The next theme will offer a more in depth look at the role and impact of intention, followed by a return to the other issue brought up by the statements above, namely the legalistic interpretation of the First Precept and who it does and does not apply to in *Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing*.

### Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship

**Table 4.4: Intention and Guardianship (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2	
Carry Weapons – Others Carried Weapons	1	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Do Your Job	17	
First Precept – Intention Mitigates Killing	16	
First Precept – Other Considerations	34	
First Precept – Protector / Guardianship	7	
Intention – General	10	
Intention – Intention Mitigates Killing	16	
Killing	45	
Mindfulness – Decrease Harm	3	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
12	193	<b>Intention and Guardianship</b>

The above discussion of serving others even in situations that involve the use of weapons, albeit in a training environment, leads to one of the overarching conceptions that most of the chaplains explored when discussing the direct action of violence and killing in a military context. This theme focused on two areas, the first being the idea of intention and shifting it away from negative mental traits such as anger, even if actual killing still took place. This naturally led into the second area of discussion for this theme, namely how the chaplains hoped or intended the service members would conceive of themselves instead, usually in terms of guardianship.

### **Killing and Intention for Service Members**

The chaplains spoke in broad terms about intention towards the troops they were serving, as well as the chaplain's own intention in shaping these hopes. In discussing how or why a Buddhist would join the military as a chaplain, one participant stated,

In Mahayana Buddhism, intention is number one. What is your intention to join the Army? Are you here to encourage soldiers to kill? Or are you here to solve their problems with suffering? Or are you here to offer loving kindness? Are you here to see their suffering and be here not to encourage them to kill?

This chaplain views the role of intention in regard to its impact, in this case in encouraging others not to kill. Using the precepts as guidelines allows people to see how their actions either increase or decrease the suffering around them. While intention is not the only factor that influences the impact of an action, it is a powerful first step when making a decision. The same chaplain continued,

In my view this is where human suffering comes from, no matter what kind of concept they use, justice or whatever, because at this point these are all human perceptions that we create to persuade ourselves to get something done. All we need to do is be aware that chaplains are here to help the issue of suffering. I'm not here to help you feel joy in killing, but my intention is set to see the suffering, to hear the crying, and to reach out to help. That must be our intention in our tradition as a Mahayana Buddhist monk.

The future is unknown as various causes and conditions combine and break apart, and so the primary anchor now becomes how intention can address this moment now.

Another chaplain outlined the ability of intention to orient toward more positive results, stating that this was a necessary component when considering the First Precept.

Intention comes around with our thinking. That means that I keep in my mind to do this. I use all my energy, from mental energy to physical energy, to do this. This is intention. But sometimes I just do it because it's my job. I don't mean to do it, but because I happen to be there, I don't have an option. So, I turn my intention back to the protection of people, to serving the country, instead of focusing on fighting and killing people. Because those people love their lives too.

That is why intention is very important. It is a kind of concentration. There will be power along with that. Also, when I do it, the result will come back more powerful as well. That is why the Buddha talks about this a lot.

As a side note, this was the only comment in the entire interview process where a chaplain directly recognized enemy combatants as human beings with the same motivations and concerns as the US service members.<sup>181</sup> This comment also brings up the consequences of one's actions. In Buddhist terms, this is referred to as karma, and it will be discussed in more detail below in *Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing*. In all the above statements, the chaplains emphasize that the intentions of both the chaplains as they decide how best to help those under their care, as well as the intentions of those same service members, are important to consider and work with. Through consideration and effort, intention is maintained. This process continues through discerning the consequences of that effort, which then lead to new considerations of intention. Altogether, this forms the mechanism through which precept practice takes place. Rather than a static rule, the precept operates as a dynamic process. This relationship between precept practice and intention is summed up by another chaplain who stated,

For the First Precept, I would say to myself, observe this precept seriously and your intention. Do not participate or give suggestions for killing for whatever

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<sup>181</sup> At one point during my first deployment, our ship's media department created a compilation of footage from our airstrikes and played it on the mess deck. They seemed to preemptively understand how many of us would feel watching other human beings die directly from our actions by adding at the end of the presentation, "Remember, these are our enemies and they are trying to carry out terrorist attacks against your loved ones." The way in which this was said seemed to imply that everyone was aware that this was not actually the only purpose of our government had in engaging in this conflict. Another sailor told me about a similar presentation when everyone was cheering each explosion, and a Christian chaplain was standing by and not smiling. When challenged about not cheering, he reportedly said "I understand why we are here and fully support the necessity of our mission and the United States, but I will never cheer when I witness a human life ending."

reason. And this I think is applied to all Buddhist chaplains in the military. Be mindful with your speech.

In this work with intention, the chaplains were aware that their own role was very different from that of the average service member, and that it was much easier for the chaplains to divorce themselves from the violence inherent in military service compared to frontline service members. Commenting on this difference, one chaplain stated,

Everyone chose to join the Army for different reasons and this is a machine that is training you to kill, to attack, and to basically try to protect. For soldiers we cannot say that they do have intention to kill just because they were trained to kill. Kind of like a chaplain who is a non-combatant, it's a different case. From the beginning you are not trained with the intention to kill, but the soldiers are.

This statement underlines the importance of intention not only for the chaplain but perhaps more importantly for the service members under their care. Several chaplains reflected on the environment their service members were in, how dedicated it was to instilling a sense of glory and the appropriateness of violence as a response, and thus how important the teaching of correct intention was.

Everything in the military is about propaganda, it doesn't matter which system you come from – either from the justice side or the evil side, any power you might have, but it's all propaganda. Here you have to motivate people to do something (fight), so this is a method to socialize them, a propaganda way.

In the face of the propaganda and the indoctrination which service members face, there might be little choice in the actions that come to mind when serving on the frontline.<sup>182</sup> As mentioned in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*, this environment was effective

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<sup>182</sup> The most blatant example of this that I remember was during boot camp when one of our drill instructors suddenly appeared at the end of a long day and began yelling at us for some made-up infraction, then “beat” us, i.e. made us perform extensive punitive physical exercises. Immediately afterward, he had us stand at attention while he played a September 11<sup>th</sup> video about the attacks and surviving children grieving their lost parents. We were told we had no respect for our training or our country and that these children were why we were here, to defend them, to fight, to understand this was not a game. Towards the end of the video I realized that having the video and the screen already prepared meant the whole thing, from the initial yelling, to the exercises, to the video, had all been contrived and I felt internal resistance to what I was watching...until I made the conscious decision in that moment to let the message sink in, to feel

enough to coerce one of the chaplains into training with weapons when he served as an enlisted soldier. The chaplains understood this reality and were able to speak it directly,

However, if you stay in this organization, I recommend that you be professional when you kill. All this training is basically applied to this principle. So, train yourself, train yourself not to kill with anger or hatred.

It is within this reality of violence explored in *Theme 2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm* above, in the microcosm where killing takes place, that a shift of intention becomes the primary focus. Through the dedicated use of discernment towards intention, a shift towards more constructive outcomes might begin.

In Theravada it talks about a person who killed many people and then at the end of his life he felt guilty about it. Then one of the Buddha's disciples, Shariputra, met with him and asked what his intention was at that time – were you angry? Did you want to kill them? So, if you don't have the intention to do so, you just did it because it is your job, your duty, then it is something you may need to reflect on in a positive way.

### **Chaplain Intention for Guardians and Protectors**

As service members were encouraged to shift their intention away from anger and a joy in killing, many of the chaplains described uplifting a new type of self-conception. The most common positive way to reflect on one's service as expressed by the chaplains was to shift the conversation from one of killing to one of guardianship or protector.

Speaking as if directly to a service member, on chaplain stated,

I don't touch a weapon at all as a chaplain, but I don't see you as a killer, so you still have the precept of no killing. If you have the intention to kill other people then you break your precept and so you are not a good Buddhist, but you are a guardian and that is different.

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my emotional reaction of wanting to fight and embrace it. In retrospect I can see how everything fit together, the stress, the physical exhaustion, and a noble way out, to make me want to accept the message and to also believe it was my own choice in choosing to believe. And it worked.

This view was mirrored almost verbatim by another chaplain who extended this line of thought, expanding on one of the specific roles of some service members,

I see the soldier, the US Army soldier as a protector, a guardian, so you are not a killer. You don't just get a weapon and kill people. You protect them, you guard them, you help them. You are my guardian, you are my chaplain assistant, you save my life, you are my guardian.<sup>183</sup>

This concept of guardianship has already been echoed in other themes, such as *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*, where one of the chaplains advocated for warriors rather than killers in the military ranks. By conceiving of oneself as a protector and then acting accordingly, the impact of violent actions on oneself, as opposed to the person who was killed, may be mitigated to some extent. As mentioned in *Theme 1: What is the First Precept?*, there are several steps that must occur in order for a precept to be fully broken, and within the confines of a military culture with exceedingly strict expectations and mechanisms for compliance, intention is the easiest area to allow for change.

When they struggle, that is what I talk about. Are they here to kill enemies or to protect people who are behind them, or their country? What is their intention and what does your mind focus on? If your mind concentrates on "I'm going to kill people," then you'll receive from what you have done and what you're going to do, but if you concentrate on "I'm going to protect people" then it is a different story. You are not here to kill people, you are here to protect, and sometime people get killed.

This chaplain emphasizes that something will always be taken away from an action, but that intentions will be able to mitigate or shift the impact of those actions, at

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<sup>183</sup> Chaplain Assistant in the Army and Air Force, or Religious Program Specialist (RPs) in the Navy, is an enlisted rate or mission operation specialty (MOS). Their duties are to assist in the administrative functioning of the chaplain, as well as serve as the chaplain's direct bodyguard in the field. They are trained in the use of firearms for the purpose of protecting the chaplain and are authorized to engage in combat for this purpose. Chaplain Assistants or RPs are always stationed with chaplains as part of any given command's Chaplain Department.

least for the individual. Paraphrasing the sutras, one chaplain explained both how intention will help ameliorate the impact of violence, while at the same time acknowledging that intention will never be able to fully remove the results that service members will face because of their actions.<sup>184</sup>

It means you're not completely guilty. You don't fully break your morals or your ethics. You know that you had good intentions to protect people, that it was not my intention to kill. Intention is really important in Buddhism. If you have an intention, then you fully take away from what you've done. But if you have no intention, then that's different. You still have results, yes, but it's less than if you had intention. If you tried to grab some metal that you put in the fire for 10 hours and it glows red hot, you can grab it but your whole hand will get burned. But if you only use one finger to push the metal, the whole metal will still move, but you'll only get burned a little on your finger instead of your whole hand. I use this example, since if you enjoy killing people, that is you grabbing the metal with your whole hand and it gets burned, but with good intention there is still the effect of one of your fingers getting burned, but there is less effect in damaging your own personal morals and ethics.

At times, some of the chaplains made a distinction between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, as well as enlisted or frontline troops versus non-combatant military members, especially other chaplains, when discussing how precepts and direct killing were to be understood. This difference is especially highlighted in *Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing* below. However, one chaplain specifically spoke about enlisted, frontline, Buddhist military members, when he emphasized the heart of this theme on intention.

So then they say I'm being trained to engage the enemy, to kill the enemy, so am I still a Buddhist? I say yes, you are still Buddhist – you already took the precept, no killing. And that precept is for a killer. If you kill with intention, you are no longer a Buddhist, but you are not a killer, you are a soldier. I see a soldier as different from a killer. I see the soldier, the US Army soldier as the protector, the guardian, so you are not a killer. You don't just get a weapon and kill people. You protect them, you guard them, you help them.

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<sup>184</sup> Nanatusita, *Bhikkhu Patimokkha*, 73.

It is interesting to note that none of the chaplains interviewed extended the idea of protection and guardianship from needing to perform ostensibly problematic actions with a positive intention into a discussion of the intentionally helpful actions performed by the armed services outside of its combat role. This primarily includes the humanitarian operations that are performed by the military, both in terms of disaster and emergency response, to long-planned reconstruction efforts. This is noteworthy because Buddhist service members have gone on record stating this as a motivation for their military service, including myself, and the positive role that Buddhist chaplains have taken in these types of missions has also been publicized.<sup>185</sup>

Returning to the above statement, this chaplain raises a key point which will be discussed further in *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*, by raising the question of what the purpose of the precepts are to begin with. Here, the chaplain points out that precepts are designed to engage actions or situations that are already occurring. They are not designed to guide people through non-issues, or situations that have long since been resolved. Instead, one aspect of the precepts is to shift the intention behind certain behaviors and slowly craft them towards a different end. For the chaplains who operate in a military setting, one of the major roles of the First Precept is to shift the perceptions of the service members from killing to guardianship through proper intention.

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<sup>185</sup> Ruben Perez, "Spokane, Wash. Native Serves Aboard USS Harry S. Truman," Navy Office of Community Outreach, June 30, 2014, <https://www.fairchild.af.mil/News/Article/495969/spokane-wash-native-serves-aboard-uss-harry-s-truman/>; Matthew Sissel, "The Only Buddhist Chaplain in the Department of the Navy," Marines Official Website, February 21, 2017, <https://www.marforpac.marines.mil/Media-Room/Pacific-Marines-Stories/Article/Article/1089593/the-only-buddhist-chaplain-in-the-department-of-the-navy/>.

### Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing

**Table 4.5: Service Member's Burden of Killing (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Buddhists Go Where Needed – General	9	
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Compassion to Troops – General	35	
Compassion to Troops – Killing Stressors	10	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Killing	3	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Killing	45	
Mental Health / Moral Injury	20	
Military Sexual Trauma	1	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Condemn	2	
Upaya – Support Military Despite Precepts	2	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
12	198	<b>Service Member's Burden of Killing</b>

In the last theme, one of the chaplains mentioned how intention can shift the impact of violence, like moving molten metal with a finger instead of the whole hand. While the impacts may be mitigated, they cannot be wholly removed. This next major area therefore explored how chaplains worked with those who had been metaphorically burned through violence. The understanding of the spiritual damage caused by killing was almost universally acknowledged by both the, however a second minor discussion of how to engage with those who intended violence towards others, or enjoyed killing was also touched upon, and will be explored here as well.

### **The Spiritual Damage of Killing**

The chaplains universally stated that the actions or inactions of anyone who came to talk with them had no bearing on the chaplain's own outlook towards them. One of the foundational outlooks which every chaplain shared was the important role of being non-judgmental towards those seeking help. Even if the chaplains themselves do not support killing, the act of killing did not make anyone unworthy of support. When asked how one chaplain viewed those who had killed, the chaplain responded,

Still the same. If anyone who killed before comes to me asking advice, they have something bothering them, they've experienced suffering. As a chaplain, how can I help them when they experience suffering? And for the people who are about to go to war, then as a chaplain how can I help them to calm themselves, to anchor themselves, to understand more about their relationship between themselves over the long term and with humanity?

Another chaplain reiterated this sentiment by stating,

My job is about helping service members in their difficult time. My job is about loving kindness and compassion and carrying the scriptures to help people in their struggles. Not many people want to harm others, but when they do or if they do and are upset about whatever happened, I do not support people to kill, but I work with people who have to be there or have done something.

According to the chaplains, this lack of judgement was often recognized by the service members and turned into an access point for them to begin a journey towards healing. Given the strong moral structures which culturally surround killing, as well as the service member's own internal values, the chaplains appeared to believe that being judged by others for past actions often influenced whether service members were willing to seek out help.

I see a lot of moral injury. They tend to become, as it were, my regulars as soon as they know that I am not going to judge them for what they've done. I am going to judge them for what they will do and what they are doing now. I can't go back and change the past. They can't go back and change the past. It's

senseless to judge them for what they were required to do. But we can guide them to do better in the future and to not give into whatever impulse there was. We can guide them to awareness and to make that a point of meaning, rather than a point of condemnation.

This comment turns the role of non-judgement on its head, and begins by implying that some service members who carry the burden of killing have either been shamed by others for their actions or otherwise self-censor due to internal shame. The chaplain then demonstrates that although all people are welcome, this does not turn into a *carte blanche* acceptance of any actions or a support of moral relativism moving forward. Rather, the chaplains maintained a clear moral and ethical standard and through this used the teachings of cause and effect to change the future from this moment onward, rather than trying to untangle the web of conditions from the past or believing that assigning blame is needed to solve the problem. Finally, this comment brings up a topic which most of the chaplains referred to as a primary burden for many service members – moral injury.

While the term ‘moral injury’ is mostly a 21<sup>st</sup> century invention, Buddhist tradition has seen this phenomenon throughout its own history. Some of the chaplains presented the Buddhist path of awakening as one of the primary responses to moral injury through referencing a figure already discussed in *Theme B: Being a Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader*, Angulimala. The following quotation offers a brief remark about Angulimala and moral injury and is followed by a different chaplain explaining how Angulimala and his story serve as a foundation for direct interventions in moral injury for military members of today.

I look at the modern definition of moral injury, the contraction between core values and actions. Moral injury doesn't just happen in modern times, it

happened back in the Buddha's time. In the Buddha's time we have Angulimala. Angulimala killed 999 people, and the Buddha was still open and accepted him into the Sangha, but it wasn't easy for Angulimala to transform himself. He struggled, but with support he transformed himself. Angulimala became a saint who blessed a pregnant woman and she delivered the baby safely.

The second chaplain continues,

When people already killed, first you need to forgive yourself and let it go. Understand that the karma is already done, but the most important thing is that new karma can be created which will help with healing and coping. I always use the story of Angulimala. He already killed others, but he needed to forgive himself and learn about the present. In the end he was completely free from mental suffering. I listen to them and don't blame them. I give them compassion and skills for those who have had those difficulties, especially if they've come back from war and already killed a lot of people and feel guilty. I'm going to use the tools – he already understands what he's done – to point him in the right direction to be able to release that suffering.

The healing and understanding discussed by the chaplains above ultimately focus on the final process of transforming suffering into meaning. Another chaplain explored the process of working with those who have killed as they work towards transforming their suffering into meaning.

Where someone has taken a life, maybe they were off on some kind of mission, maybe their leadership told them to go kill some guy. "Oh, that guy has a weapon, go kill them," and it turns out he had a loaf of bread. So, if I'm going to offer condemnation and say, "Oh, you were bad because you killed this guy," OK, I can do that and sure, it was bad to kill him. You were given orders to do so, and you should have thought them through, but I can't change that past. I'm not going to sit here and judge them for mistakes that were made. I can help guide them through those mistakes and turn them into sources of meaning by making sure that they do know the impact that has happened and to use that as a springboard to help them develop Right Intention.

While meaning can often be seen as an end in and of itself, here is presented an understanding that the meaning derived from the process of addressing past killing can feed into the service member's life through building a new framework which informs future actions. Using the language of the previous theme, *Theme 4: Intention and*

*Guardianship*, this healing process helps solidify the service member's new intention. In terms of killing, this becomes a feedback loop where previous meaning informs future intention, which subsequently influences future actions leading to new meaning which hopefully verifies and supports the initial truth of the First Precept. This verifies the teaching of the First Precept, namely that unremitting killing leads to suffering, not only of those physically hurt, but of the perpetrator as well. This idea of the precepts as an internally reinforcing mechanism will be explored more in *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*.

### **Chaplains and Those Who Value Violence**

The final area of this theme focuses on an assumption that every chaplain except one (who will be discussed below) operated under, an assumption that both the First Precept and this research utilize. Put simply, the assumption is that killing is bad. This is often assumed to be a universal truth, and the foundation of countless moral systems, however for those who do not hold that killing is wrong, the military would be an excellent and socially acceptable place to live out a life of violence. One chaplain remarked on this, and how it would influence his actions.

They still have injury, moral injury or spiritual injury, and as a chaplain I have to help them. I can't say, "Hey, you're a killer," and try to avoid them. I try to be with them. I knew soldiers who said, "Hey, I want to kill that commander, I want to kill that sergeant major." By regulation I am not allowed to disclose to anyone what these soldiers said, but I try to meet with them, walk with them. Wherever they go I go with them. When they have that intention to kill other people, I still try to be with them and help them because whether it is the duty to kill the enemy or because of accidentally killing other people or intentionally killing the enemy, as a chaplain I am still with them. I am here to help them see what is right and what is wrong.

“To meet them, walk with them,” in this case is not a metaphor. As discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, military chaplains are one of the only professional groups which have zero mandated reporting status and are explicitly prohibited from disclosing anything whatsoever that is said to them. Premeditated murder, plans for abuse, joy in criminality, nothing that is said can be disclosed. This often makes others wonder what chaplains can do when they are told about an imminent crime, and here is one of those solutions. While the chaplain cannot disclose what is said to them, they still retain freedom of movement and intervention, and so this chaplain discusses physically accompanying or even following the service member until they are certain of the service member’s and others’ safety. Again, upholding the First Precept can work in tandem with being non-judgmental towards others without diminishing the ability to enact helpful interventions.

### **Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing**

#### **Theme 4.6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acknowledge Killing – No	27	
Direct Killing – Chaplain Not Responsible	1	
Don't Judge Others	15	
Evasive / Defensive – Small Actions Count	4	
Evasive / Defensive – Won't Answer	2	
Find Own Meaning – General	2	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning After Killing	3	
Find Own Meaning – Meaning Before Killing	13	
First Precept – Applies to Me Only	5	
First Precept – Do Your Job	17	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – My Business, Not Community	6	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Karma – Individual – Chaplain	8	
Karma – Individual – Troops	24	
Killing	45	
Not Responsible for Others – General	2	
Not Responsible for Others – Karma	2	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Buddhists	3	
Not Responsible for Others – Not Condemn	2	
Not Responsible for Others – Troops Own Choice	10	
Take a Stand – No	37	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
22	293	<b>Chaplain Responsibility for Killing</b>

The chaplains were explicit in their refusal to use weapons and in their compassion for helping others who wore a military uniform. However, as discussed in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*, this still leaves out the question of whether the chaplains are tacitly helping the military enact violence. This theme therefore focuses on whether the chaplains still bear responsibility for better facilitating those who do enact violence on others. This theme uncovered three major conversations that have not yet been explored and touched upon several themes already discussed above. After some brief comments about themes already discussed by the chaplains, this theme first discusses the chaplain perceptions of who the First Precept actually applies to and whether or not this personal relationship can be monitored by anyone else. This is followed by a discussion of the role of karma and other's individual responsibility within the realm of military violence. Finally this theme explored the purpose of the First Precept by asking if the role of the chaplain is to judge or to help.

Most chaplains were ardent in their stance that they bore little to no responsibility towards the violence enacted by the military, despite working for that institution and supporting its service members. Here, responsibility typically focuses on if the chaplain is willing to put forth a specific moral judgement about violent actions on either the individual or institutional level, or acknowledge how the chaplain's own actions lead to more efficient and effective killing thus increasing the overall harm or suffering in the world. In previous themes this attitude has already been encountered, especially in *Theme 2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm*, where many of the chaplains voiced that violence is an unavoidable aspect of this world. The chaplains presented this view in such a way as to legitimize their presence in the military and distance themselves from harm that they believe will happen with or without them. In this theme it was also shown how several chaplains viewed their work as actively reducing present harm, working in conjunction with the belief that as violence is an inherent part of this world then the complete removal of it was never a consideration. Finally, in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*, some chaplains describe actively helping those who they serve to become proficient with firearms and passing weapons qualifications. These discussions already point towards the viewpoint that the chaplains see themselves as having a limited connection, and therefore limited responsibility, towards the violence carried out by military structures. In this theme, the connection between the chaplain and the violence of the military is more explicitly explored, with the resulting viewpoints consistent with the orientation of the previous themes. The reasons the chaplains asserted having limited responsibility for the violence in the military often focused on various understandings of

who the First Precept applies to, understandings of karma, and a differentiation of autonomy between the chaplains and other service members.

### **Precepts are Personal**

The first type of response when asking about the relationship of the First Precept to the actions of the military tended to draw a stark line between the chaplain and their institution.

The First Precept applies to me directly because I'm the one who received the precept. And second, the soldiers are not Buddhist, so regardless I am the one responsible for my karma and for my actions. I'm the one that made that choice and when I made that choice, I took responsibility for that choice.

Although the chaplain is willing to take responsibility for his direct actions, there appears to be a divide between that and the overarching actions of the military which the chaplain implies are not his responsibility. The chaplain does make a valid point, that the vast majority of military service members are not Buddhist, nor have they taken the precepts, and so holding them to a standard they did not agree to is unreasonable. This awareness can be seen as admirable, as the chaplain is refusing to operate under the assumption that his own Buddhist values and outlook hold universal authority over others, even those who hold different values. Furthermore, in *Theme F: Relationship With Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains*, some chaplains from other religious traditions were presented as believing that everyone is accountable to the non-Buddhist chaplain's own moral standards, regardless of whether or not others agree with them. This willingness to not hold others accountable to Buddhist standards was explicitly pointed out when another chaplain stated,

There are values in the Buddha's teaching which I hold on to, because that is who I am. But soldiers are from different backgrounds and different faiths, so they can not necessarily use those values from the Buddhist tradition. I do believe that whatever values they do have can be shared with Buddhist values, because love and wanting to be free from suffering are values that the Buddha also taught.

The shadow side of this acknowledgement of difference was that some chaplains appeared to censor themselves at times in the direct advocacy of their own values. This self-censorship was explored in *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*, when one chaplain stated that silence was the best response when conflicting values were presented by other military members. This silence was more strongly held as a direct defense by another chaplain when asked about his responsibility surrounding military violence.

I don't have to answer that, since the First Precept only applies to me. It is one of the Five Precepts we take, but the soldiers have no idea about the precepts. The soldiers even go hunting for joy and so there is no way I can deal with that. If they come to me directly and ask for advice I say no, don't hunt, because we are killing living beings who also have a life and a family. But because they don't practice Buddhism and they still go hunting for fun, I can't say no.

The chaplains ultimately held only their own direct actions accountable to the First Precept, and while being willing to discuss the First Precept and the negative impact of violence in broad terms, they refused to use the standards of the First Precept when discussing their outlook in relationship to individual service members. This tended to create a double standard for themselves and others.

Yes, my First Precept has already demonstrated itself, so for me if I'm told I have to kill people then I'm not going to do that. I recommend my loved ones to not do that. But if they had to do that, before they met me or before we talked, if they fought in a war, they had a responsibility to do it and they did it. It's not just right or wrong, a lot of things have other implications and effects on people and the decisions they make.

Here, the chaplain's First Precept was upheld as absolute, but at the same time it was not applied to other members of the military who the chaplain refused to pass judgement on. When asked what the First Precept would say about the violent actions of other service members, most of the chaplains refused to comment one way or another.

I won't tell them if their actions are right or wrong. If they ask for my advice about whether to stay in or out, I cannot make that decision for them. They have to make that decision for themselves. If they ask if they kill a person, is that right or wrong, I will ask them what their conscience tells them. But it seems that instead of answering them directly, I ask them about their perspective, because they're coming to me because it's bothering them a lot. So, I will ask them and guide them through that process because they are the one going through the journey. I'm not the one to make the decision for them. I'm not the one to say yes, it's right, or no, it's wrong.

### **Karma and Individual Responsibility**

The idea that other people's actions belonged to themselves and the chaplains shared limited responsibility for this was often couched in terms of karma. The karma of others was often spoken of as if it were insulated from all other forms of influence, which was somewhat surprising given how the interconnective nature of karma was just cited in *Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing*, as the primary quality which allowed it to be a tool for healing and transformation.

I explained to them the First Precept and told them about the concept of karma. I told them about the concept of the Eightfold Path. I explain to them that this is their choice. At the end you are the one who is responsible for your choice and your actions, no one else. Even if I say no or yes at the end, you'll still struggle with this. So just contemplate the teachings and make the decision yourself. I cannot make this decision for them, I share my understanding of the teachings with them, and at the end they make their choice.

Here the chaplain is still being willing to share his own viewpoints with others, while also drawing a line between the choices and actions of others and the chaplain's

own role and responsibilities in those actions. Another chaplain reiterated the idea that individual karma mostly removed the chaplain from responsibility towards the violent actions of others.

But in the wars 90% of them are not in the frontlines. As a Buddhist, they probably spent many lifetimes before killing a lot of people, so in that sense I would say that they need to decide for themselves, I cannot decide for anyone else. I can show scripture and show what scripture says here, but if they are a Buddhist they probably know the Five Precepts already.

Not only does this chaplain emphasize the teaching of karma and rebirth as a reason for not making a moral declaration about the actions of others, but rebirth also seems to be being used to distance the chaplain from the actions of service members. There also seems to be movement towards minimizing the overall actions of the military as an institution through pointing out that only a small percentage of service members ever see direct combat. This attempt to redirect the conversation towards the small percentage of frontline troops as being the only ones responsible for military harm was also raised in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*, when one chaplain spoke about different military job standards and how most military professions do not center on direct violence.

### **The Role of the Chaplain: To Judge or to Help?**

Balancing the interpretation of direct chaplain responsibility for military violence, some of the chaplains offered the reminder that their role was not that of moral arbiter for the military, and the same grand pronouncements about what is right and wrong were exactly what prevented some service members from seeking help as discussed in *Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing* above. Presenting the reminder that the role of the chaplain is to help and not judge, one chaplain stated,

Wow, that is the big question, but I got that all the time. I get soldiers who are Buddhist and they have that dilemma. Since they are holding the weapon, get trained, and get ready to kill. So sometimes a sergeant who trains them says, “Kill without mercy,” and that makes them feel guilty because they are Buddhist and they have the Five Precepts. The first one is no killing any living being whatsoever, and now they’re holding weapons and getting ready to engage the enemy. So most of the time when they come and ask me what the First Precept is, I don’t answer right away since I want to do a little assessment, like what do they know about the precept that they took? What do they mean by no killing?

The chaplains raise a worthwhile point here. The therapeutic relationship is usually not the time or place to preach on the virtues of specific philosophical propositions or to lay out one’s opinions about the moral failings of someone who is seeking help, yet even in these helping relationships some chaplains appeared to continue to push responsibility for actions away from themselves and their role in upholding the effectiveness of the military, instead placing it solely back on the service member.

Sometimes when the soldiers come to me I am able to meet with them on common ground. I can remind them about their own actions and that they can be responsible for themselves 100%, even if they are seeking help. The thing is, even if the doctor gives them medication, if they don’t take the medication then it’s nothing.<sup>186</sup>

As discussed above, it is possible to point to Buddhist doctrine about interconnection as evidence that chaplains and their actions are still connected to those they serve, and therefore the chaplains would still bear some type of responsibility towards what transpires in their command. The connection between the chaplains and their service members, however, is even more direct and explicit than this. In *Chapter 2 Literature Review*, the role of the chaplain was shown to not only ensure the free exercise of religion, but to also be directly focused on increasing the military’s ability to

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<sup>186</sup> Likely a reference to the *Lotus Sutra*. Reeves, *Lotus Sutra*, 294.

accomplish its missions. Some of the chaplains acknowledged this role in the helping relationship, while again drawing back into the hard divide between the direct actions of the chaplain vs. the direct actions of the service member.

I can show them more of a whole picture, but I cannot make decisions for them. So decisions and actions are still their own, and I only own my own actions. It is the law of karma. My responsibility is to make each person fit, as much as I can. Mentally support them as much as I can. The rest of what they are going to do is up to them. It depends on their job description. I don't discriminate or judge their job description.

Other chaplains were aware of their function in supporting the smooth operations of the military structure but still shied away from acknowledging that such smooth functioning included the efficient and effective application of violence.

The bottom line is when you start working as a chaplain, we don't interfere with their own karma. They have their own interpretations for living, but we are not supposed to kill, so I'm not killing. I'm not helping them to kill anybody. What I help with is to help them have resiliency, to not have mental disruptions for themselves, to let them be clear about their own path, and to help them have their own path. That is what spiritual readiness is all about.

As the conversations with the chaplains continued, some of the participants began to tease out this connection between the chaplain and the larger military structure and seemed to develop more awareness about their own potential responsibility and assistance in helping the military achieve its goals. Also applicable here is a truncated comment from *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship*, when one chaplain voiced appreciation for not taking part in direct violence, while at the same time acknowledging that the military actively encourages violence.

This is very difficult and I have no comment on this because it is their choice. Everyone chose to join the Army for different reasons and this is a machine that is training you to kill, to attack, and to basically try to protect... From the beginning chaplains are not trained with the intention to kill, but the soldiers are.

This final comment better speaks to a level of authenticity which informed the chaplains interviewed and could be felt through their spoken response even when the content of their responses could be interpreted as attempting to shift the focus of responsibility away from themselves. They were secure in their religious tradition and in the doctrines they adhered to. They were also clear that the role of a military chaplain could at times place mutually ardent values, such as the value of helping others and the value of non-violence, in contention.

### Theme 7: Chaplain Advice for Civilians

**Table 4.7: Chaplain Advice for Civilians (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Appeal to Family	1	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Killing	45	
Not Responsible for Others – Won't Support	1	
Won't Support; If Not in Military	4	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
6	116	<b>Chaplain Advice for Civilians</b>

While the chaplains were clear in drawing a line between themselves, their own precept practice, and the actions of others, the interviews uncovered another theme which added nuance to this stance. Many of the chaplains mentioned how they would act regarding those people who were not already in the military, especially if the chaplain had a personal relationship with them, such as family or temple members. This marked a shift in view when discussing someone who has not already signed a contract and posted

to their duty station with ostensibly no other choice about their situation. The idea that the decision to join the military made it too late to run through hypothetical scenarios about what is right has already been mentioned in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*. However, this attitude of drawing a line between the chaplain and the service member began to break down when this same chaplain started referring to family members and how they should be cared for.

For example, I have my kid, but I don't know what will happen when my kid grows up. My kid has the potential to be the best bad guy in world, or the best good guy in the world, you don't know. But you see him in front of you, so you feed him the best food, you give him a tool so in the future he can use that tool to help relieve personal stress, be more resilient and grow in a good direction.

While in this specific situation the chaplain is still speaking ultimately about the helping relationship between a chaplain and a military service member, the above comment does raise the question about what "growing in a good direction" might mean for a literal child or community member. This question was answered when some of the chaplains began to speak directly about their relationship with people who were not in the military. A comment from *Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing*, which is pared down and presented again, now shows a clear shift in perspective between those who have already enlisted and those who have yet to make their decision.

If I'm told I have to kill, I'm not going to do that... I recommend my loved ones to not do that. But if they had to do that, before they met me or before we talked, if they fought in a war, they had a responsibility to do it and they did it. It's not just right or wrong.

The idea that the chaplain held a different obligation towards those outside the military was reiterated by another chaplain when speaking about how he would speak to temple members as a Buddhist monastic,

Since we are in our 40's, perhaps we have a better understanding of war. Our life experience allows us to have more critical thinking about what we look at. For young people who are in their 20's, or eighteen, they might get excited to join the Army. They might come to us and ask, "Venerable, should I join the Army?" Of course, I would suggest that they be cautious and look at what you are doing. I would not suggest you go and join. But if they want to go, I cannot stop them. But if they go as a Buddhist minister, I would encourage them to go as a chaplain because you are a non-combatant.

The chaplain acknowledges that people with limited life experience may not fully understand the choices they make, and the chaplain should be available to help guide them appropriately. In this case it would likely be to not join the military, and if this is unavoidable then to encourage them to join as a non-combatant, such as a chaplain. At the same time, this chaplain acknowledges that his purpose is not to control others or make decisions for them. Another chaplain echoed this same viewpoint when recounting how he would speak to family or community members if they were considering military service.

I explain to them the First Precept, but it's up to them. They make their choice, because sometimes the reason they join the Army is not about serving, but about other goals. It's about financial needs, because of family members or something else. But if they come and ask for advice, or if they ask me, "If you were my sister or brother what do you suggest?" Sometimes, I would say no. That is what I would say to them. If someone asks me if I was their family member what would I advise, that's what I would advise them. But if they just ask me, it depends on the way they ask. If they ask if it is moral or immoral to join the Army, that's different. If they are asking to receive some recommendation or some letter of recommendation, that's a different story.

Here, the chaplain would neither suggest that someone should join the military, nor assist in their efforts to sign up even after the decision was made. This comment also demonstrates that most chaplains appeared to feel freer to express a specific opinion about what they considered to be wise and unwise when speaking within the context of family relationships. As mentioned earlier in *Theme A: Who Are The Chaplains?*, almost

all of the chaplains interviewed were of Asian descent and were either first- or second-generation immigrants, and so these comments could also point to differences in how family is viewed in terms of both the rights and responsibilities of family members towards each other in Asian cultures compared to Western cultures, however a detailed exploration of this is not within the purview of this research.

Returning to this specific theme, the clearest example of the chaplains' reticence towards encouraging people to join the military came in response to the direct question of what the chaplain would say if a Buddhist were to ask if they should enlist. One chaplain's short response was simply, "I would suggest not."

### **Theme 8: Killing May Be Permissible**

**Table 4.7: Killing May Be Permissible (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Enlightenment in Killing	2	
Evasive / Defensive – But Others Do It Too	2	
Evasive / Defensive – Contradictory Values	4	
Evasive / Defensive – General	1	
Evasive / Defensive – Results Outweigh Actions	2	
First Precept – General	36	
Jataka	2	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
7	49	<b>Killing May Be Permissible</b>

The penultimate theme explores some of the comments made by the interview subjects which appeared to imply that killing might need to be accepted at some point and perhaps even incorporated into one's practice. Overall, this was only explicitly

stated by one chaplain, implied by a second, and always presented alongside a larger overall discussion of the suffering that comes about with military violence. While there were relatively few comments of this type, they occurred often enough to warrant their own specific theme within this overall discussion, especially as they demonstrated the biggest challenge to a traditional understanding of the First Precept.

This idea was already brought up before, especially in the comments outlined in *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship*. As mentioned before, although killing is still taking place, as long as it is done with correct intention, usually an intention towards protection, then the killing becomes more acceptable. This idea that there is a place for killing was also present in the exploration of real world violence in *Theme 2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm*. These two ideas of intention and the real world are combined when one chaplain stated,

When you look at the military right now and in the future, we will have another war coming up, 10 years from now, 15 years from now, but probably we will have one. At that time, with large-scale combat operations, it won't be small. Not just on land, or air, or sea, but also in space and cyberspace. A lot of casualties will happen and as soldiers who have the motivation to join the Army, they all have to carry weapons to serve and fight. They cannot deny their roles, so now if they understand their own values in life, know how to find meaning and purpose in their life, it will help them tremendously later on.

The role of killing cannot be denied, and the lessons of the Buddha will help mitigate some of the consequences. In this way, space is made for killing to be included, albeit in a disapproved manner, into one's world view. Another chaplain also carefully and meticulously created a space for killing, referencing Buddhist teachings to assist in determining when it is appropriate.

So in some very limited circumstances, and we have to be very careful and very mindful of these circumstances, and we have to reflect very carefully on these

circumstances before doing them, while we're doing them, and after we're doing them, as the Buddha gave his advice to Rahula, we have to consider that if these are the only options that we have, and one of them is going to lead to a lot of people suffering, and we can prevent that by making one person suffer to the point where they die, usually as quickly as humanely possible, since we don't want to make them suffer any longer than they have to, we don't want to make them suffer any more than we want to make anyone else suffer because of what they're going to do, if we can minimize that suffering in any way, even if that is a bad option, if that is the least bad option of all the bad options, then that is the one we have to take.<sup>187</sup>

This comment very much echoes the discussion in *Theme 2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm* about the reality of violence in this world and also makes sure to emphasize that no act of violence should ever be carried out carelessly. However, if the situation ultimately requires it, then it is permissible to kill. Creating space for killing despite acknowledging the harm it causes was echoed by another chaplain when discussing karma,

You already agreed to be in the military. You must have responsibility for your own actions. You have your own karma. You signed that paper and you cannot break that. If you do, it will have different consequences. You have a choice to break your service and go back home or move forward. Either one will be your sacrifice. You sacrifice for your county. You know exactly what you will have to do, what you will have to face. You will have bad karma. If you have no intention to kill people, you just have the intention to protect them, this might reduce your bad karma.

Again, killing is still not an ideal, but there are ways to mitigate its impact and allow for it to still take place. Another chaplain reiterated that he does not support killing, however there are ways to work with it even when it does take place.

For the soldiers, we stand neutral. We don't encourage them. If they come to us and ask, I will say that I am not trained in tactics. I can't help. I can't show you how to attack or kill. But if they come up to me and say, "You know, chaplain, I feel so bad I killed," then I will say, "You know this is your profession, but never

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<sup>187</sup> Sujato, "Advice to Rahula at Ambalatthika (MN61)," Sutta Central, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/mn61/en/sujato>.

lose your humanity.” So don’t forget your humanity and second, never make it a habit to kill for pleasure. So have compassion for your actions, for yourself, and loving kindness for yourself.

The chaplain acknowledges that any act of killing is tragic, as well as that through practices of self-compassion and loving kindness, service members who find themselves in a violent situation will still be presented with choices that can lead to different consequences. Another chaplain took this idea a step further, showing that not only do chaplains stand silent in the face of killing, chaplains should also actively engage in questioning when killing is appropriate.

Know the difference and know when it’s appropriate and when it’s not appropriate to kill. They tend to like killers, and I have to sit there and make sure that I am combating that to ensure that they are still doing things morally and ethically, in as moral and ethical a way as best and as often as I possibly can.

This idea that there are always choices and opportunities for positive outcomes regardless of the situation or action was further expounded on by another chaplain who brought up how the act of killing may itself be a potential pathway towards enlightenment. Rather than being seen as a barrier towards awakening, it was reframed as a gateway for ultimate understanding.

If you don’t have anger, you can kill. If you do have anger, you violate your First Precept intentionally. You support an organization that uses propaganda to support you to kill, but we are here basically to minimize suffering. I always keep this in mind, to bring with my presence humanity, joyfulness, and equanimity. These are the qualities, so we have a saying, “Drop your cleaver and become a Buddha.” When you put down your weapon and you realize that what you have been doing is wrong and you reflect on the qualities of enlightenment, then you can become enlightened.

It is clear in this statement that the chaplain is not condoning violence but rather stating that acts of violence do not morally pollute someone beyond redemption. It was mentioned earlier in *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship* and reiterated here that

everything the military touches turns into propaganda and indoctrination. This is to mold human beings into intentional killers so that military institutions can achieve their overarching goal of destroying the enemy. *Chapter 2: Literature Review* explored how multiple other cultures have restructured Buddhist teachings into a form that condones and perhaps even glorifies military violence, and so it is easy to see how such processes would begin in this country through the use of such teachings, such as those contained in the above statement.

A final comment from one chaplain brought up the infamous story of the ship's captain from the *Upaya Kausalya Sutra*, detailing one of the Buddha's previous lives.

I share a story in the Jataka tales about once in a previous life of the Buddha, when he was a bodhisattva, he was the captain of the ship with about 500 merchants and he finally killed that robber to save the people.

This tale was discussed in more detail in *Chapter 2: Literature Review* as it is traditionally pointed to as one of the most blatant admission for intentional killing across the pan-Buddhist tradition. Given its predominance as a clear support of violence, it was remarkable this was the only time when this story was mentioned by any of the chaplains interviewed.

Ultimately, it could be argued that this theme is not actually a different topic from what has already been discussed above. It contains comments that are relevant to the themes of intention, guardianship, and non-judgement. However, it may be possible to become sidetracked by the mechanisms of how violence can be understood, through intention, karma, or realism. Due to this, the comments in this theme were deemed important enough to create its own separate discussion focusing solely on the end

conclusion of the other thematic elements, namely that violence is ultimately accepted and can be condoned even in the face of the First Precept.

### Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain

**Table 4.9: The Burdens of the Chaplain (Reiterated)**

Second-Cycle Code	Instances	Third-Cycle Code Category
Acknowledge Killing – Yes	27	
Carry Weapons – General	6	
Carry Weapons – I Carried Weapons	2	
Carry Weapons – Others Carry Weapons	1	
Direct Killing – Chaplain Still Responsible	12	
First Precept – Chaplain Still Responsible	6	
First Precept – General	36	
First Precept – Other Considerations	29	
Killing	45	
Take a Stand – Yes	20	
Total Codes	Total Instances	
10	187	<b>The Burdens of the Chaplain</b>

Several of the previous themes have explored ways in which chaplains work with various contending values in their support of the military. It might become easy to believe that this means the chaplains are unaffected by their role, the burdens of their service, or their own recognition that they are assisting an institution to perform actions which the chaplains morally oppose on some level. None of these conclusions would be accurate. This final theme explores the chaplains' recognition of their direct responsibility for the overall actions of the military, their awareness of the clear tension this places on their precept practice, and finally the impact from engaging with these burdens. This theme first explores the general sentiment of many of the chaplains in

terms of how the military operates as a whole, before turning towards a more dedicated discussion of the tensions between Buddhist religious and military values. The conversation then explored the pressures of operating as a religious and, for almost all of those interviewed, a cultural minority within the United States Armed Forces. Flowing from these burdens, this theme will finally explore the role of selfcare and the desire for community for Buddhists within the various Chaplain Corps.

### **General Sentiments**

Several of the chaplains made comments which implied they were aware that their work in reducing suffering or minimizing harm may not be as effective as they would prefer. One chaplain, who in *Theme 8: Killing May Be Permissible* spoke about the ability “drop your cleaver and become Buddha,” went on to briefly comment about the likelihood of this actually happening, stating “We give them the correct way, give them something to chew on. They might not eat it, but they might chew on it.”

There is hope that the teachings may be noticed, but it appears that this chaplain is aware that it is unlikely to have a major impact, let alone a systemic effect. The shortfalls in the military and the actions that are carried out in its name were noticed by another chaplain who also reflected on the limited change that he has observed during his time in the service.

I am of the mind that we really could, as a military, if we were doing things right, we would be much more mindful of what we’re doing and much more aware of the impact of our actions. We need to be aware of those things.

This chaplain was able to extend this understanding from the systemic level down to the personal level of his own involvement and support of the military, and the tension

that his deeper underlying values have created in his chosen profession. Reflecting on the efficacy of his attempts to uphold a moral outlook in the face of the military's glorification of violence, he states,

Does that always work? No. Am I liable for that? Yes, and I understand that I bear some weight of that burden, and I can accept it. I fully accept the responsibility that sometimes I will fail too. Maybe I'm not legally liable, but I am morally liable when I can't convince them to be better.

This chaplain is willing to accept his appropriate portion of responsibility in the harms carried out by the military while at the same time struggles with the conflicting values created through his Buddhist tradition. Another chaplain also spoke about this internal burden of supporting an institution which carries out actions which the chaplain views as morally questionable. Speaking directly of how this relates to the First Precept, he states,

The First Precept is "No killing, no harming sentient beings." As a chaplain I don't bear arms and don't carry weapons. I respect life. However, we live in a culture where the Army's mission is to "Fight and win the nation's wars." Whenever we view the high chain of command, they are all ready to fight and win the nation's war, which involves killing. As a chaplain we say that we are neutral and we respect life, but we are in an organization of fighting and killing to win wars, and we are involved in that collective karma regardless.

### **Religious vs. Military Values**

The struggle to work through these conflicting values is aggravated by the fact that this tension does not exist in purely the theoretical realm, but rather plays out in the chaplain's direct, daily, human interactions. In *Theme A: Who Are The Chaplains?*, several of the chaplains explored the pressure and judgement they faced from their home communities for assumedly violating the Buddhist value of non-harm through joining the

military. One chaplain continued this exploration, focusing on the ongoing discussion about the role of military service within his community.

My home temple was originally very much on board because this was a population of human beings who were being ignored. We felt that it was important for us to go in and not ignore them. Since then, I've had an opportunity to speak with a couple of the senior clergy and they are a little hesitant, if I am completely honest. They are a little bit hesitant until they learn what I am doing and how I am impacting people.

While his home community fully supported engaging military members, this comment shows they had likely assumed it would take place while their advocates were still civilians. This statement also implies that the tension between the chaplain and his home community was ultimately resolved, however this was not the case for all chaplains. Another chaplain spoke about the ongoing need to work with his home community and the friction which was caused by his decision to join the military.

I know there's a lot of questions for them especially if you come from Vietnam, or Thailand, or Taiwan, or China. Because sometimes their congregations say that you should not join the Army. It might be something that they do not want to discuss, or they think that this is something I should keep to myself. But my understanding is that if you don't talk about this then you'll get into trouble. And if you're really dedicated to Buddhism, then just open a window and let people understand what's going on and stand your ground. We cannot control others or their perceptions about the precepts, but there is no other way to let them know.

Both of these statements demonstrate some of the challenges which might arise in the chaplains' relationship with their home communities who view them as supporting violence, and the ongoing effort it takes to educate these home communities differently. At the same time, upon joining the military, these same chaplains came under pressure from their service members who were engrained in military culture for appearing to challenge the military's goals of "destroying the enemy" and being too pacifistic. This challenge from the military's side was witnessed in *Theme D: Daily Activities and*

*Command Relationship*, when the chaplains spoke of dealing with leaders who demanded that everyone “kill without mercy,” and commanders who talk about how “we need killers.” While the chaplains upheld a moral outlook in these situations, the chaplain’s own actions also came under suspicion in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*, when a sergeant challenged the chaplain about how he would react to save a fellow soldier on the battlefield. Another chaplain reiterated this tension, stating,

I saw a lot of suffering and a really big need for spirituality, especially in the command team. They can sometimes be really cold-blooded. Get the mission done, that’s number one. There is no negotiation, no matter what, and chaplains are there to represent some kind of value, some compassion.

This transforms the theoretical discussion of values into something deeply personal, magnifying the direct stresses faced by the chaplains. These dynamics demonstrate varying forms of pressure and isolation from both the chaplain’s home communities, and from those the chaplains are attempting to serve. If this were not enough, there is a third layer of pressure and isolation which the chaplains have to contend with, namely being from a minority faith tradition.

### **Being a Religious and a Cultural Minority**

In *Theme F: Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains*, several chaplains explored how differences in religious tradition led to helping and supportive relationships as well as personal growth, but this was not always the case. In that theme, several chaplains pointed out the ubiquitous presence of Christianity and its role in oppressing and forcing all other religious traditions to conform to its own understanding of how religion should operate. Another chaplain also explored this difficulty in trying to make

sense of how Buddhist chaplains should operate in an environment that automatically expects them to operate under Christian norms of spiritual care.

I'm still learning, trying to understand. Like when people want prayer and say, "My mom's going through this or that." I write it down, but for us as Buddhist chaplains, we need to make sense as Buddhist chaplains. What are we doing? So that is my question. So, thanks for your honesty in letting us speak about how there could be another way.

This chaplain continues to speak about yet another tension that comes about when trying to acclimate to a Christian-dominated environment. The chaplains seem clear about how Buddhist outlooks, values, and forms of care can differ from Christian forms, but being able to explain and advocate for their own methods and viewpoints appears to remain difficult.

The other thing is that in Asian culture you never question, and you always accept quietly. So, when Asian monastics join military chaplaincy, they never question. I want to find out what Buddhist chaplains are doing in a Christian-dominated context, and what does it mean to do interfaith work? So that is what we need to think about and find a solution for. We cannot pretend that this doesn't happen.

At this point there are already three forms of pressure centered on Buddhist chaplains. First is the pressure from their home communities for supporting violence too much. Second, pressure from the military for not supporting violence enough, and finally pressure from the Christian community to conform to their own standards of care. The above comment now points to two additional forms of pressure, namely the pressure that comes from being isolated from other Buddhist chaplains, as well as the challenges that come from attempting to integrate into not only military culture, but Western culture as well. This need for mutual support and the challenges of first-generation immigrants integrating into new cultures is further expanded upon,

Also, for people who were born in the United States and joined Army Chaplaincy, they seem more open to ask about what is happening, to speak up and defend themselves, but Buddhist monastics who joined Army Chaplaincy, they tend to keep quiet, never show up or contact each other. Like I said, be transparent, be open. If you want to disrobe and get married that's OK, no one will say you're wrong. That is your own life. Just ordain as a lay Buddhist minister. But if you just keep quiet, if you encounter struggles, or questions or issues, we have to speak up. I never see anyone speaking up. From my experience, I've encountered all these things, and I want to research this and let people know what is going on.

This comment speaks to the isolation that the chaplains have, even from other Buddhist chaplains, and the tensions that might arise from chaplains of different traditions. Here, the issue of disrobing and priestly marriage and specifically mentioned.<sup>188</sup> This implies the presence of other doctrinal issues within Buddhist tradition which do not directly relate to the military or with chaplaincy, which may still be creating distance between Buddhist chaplains of different traditions. It is also interesting to note that predominantly evangelical Christian chaplains, at least in the Navy, have historically been very willing to stand up and advocate for themselves.<sup>189</sup> This, coupled with the dynamics of race in the United States as discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, points to a confluence of pressures from power dynamics based both on race and on religion as present in the United States, further impeded by the cultural

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<sup>188</sup> This may be a reference to the Western phenomenon where many Westerners encounter Buddhism later in life, sometimes after they are already married, thus preventing a monastic life, and creating complications with required ordination and endorsement for service in both military and civilian chaplaincy. This may also reference current discussions on certain Buddhist traditions which can be found in Japan, Korea, and Tibet, where members of certain priest classes are allowed to married, and the inter-denominational discussion among Buddhists regarding their standing as monastics.

<sup>189</sup> Associated Press, "Evangelical Chaplains' Class-Action Suit Accuses Navy of Bias," *New York Times*, August 22, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/22/us/evangelical-chaplains-class-action-suit-accuses-navy-of-bias.html>.

and monastic social norms inculcated prior to their commissioning within most of the chaplains researched.

At this stage, some readers might believe that this larger discussion of the pressures and challenges faced by the Buddhist chaplains is outside of the purview of this research, as the purpose of this study is to examine the role of the First Precept, and not the acculturation of foreign-born Buddhists into the United States military. This is certainly a worthy area of far deeper exploration, and hopefully this study will provide a gateway for future researchers. At the same time, it must be remembered that the First Precept, Do not harm life, applies to all life, including how the chaplains treat themselves. As one chaplain referenced,

It's hard to talk about because I put the uniform on and the environment is to train people to protect the country, so that means we might need to kill. Our military is under the Department of Defense. Defense is protection. Protection does not mean to kill or harm. The First Precept the Buddha talks about is refraining from killing or harming other people, and that includes the self too.

### **Selfcare and Community**

This comment is likely referring to how this chaplain views suicide. That the First Precept is a prohibition against self-harm is not something which any of the chaplains, or this researcher, held any major question about. However, when the chaplain brought up not killing or harming the self, this naturally led into a discussion of selfcare, and how the chaplains attempt to deal with all of the combined pressures above. This ranged from their own understanding that their actions are helping others better enact violence, to the disapproval of both their home communities and their military counterparts, the frictions within both religious and military culture, their own social

isolation, and finally to the doctrinal tensions with other Buddhist chaplains. Selfcare and addressing how the chaplains respond to these burdens is relevant to a discussion of the First Precept since, while most discussions have equated harm with killing and death, it is entirely possible to harm someone without killing them, and the tensions, pressures, isolation, and shared responsibilities toward military violence are all forms of harm experienced by the chaplains themselves. When asked how one chaplain addresses the burden of his profession, he first stated,

I personally have an inclination towards ritual activity or ritualistic activity. Understanding that rituals for the sake of rituals are meaningless, but rituals done for a purpose, rituals that are done to be more mindful and to really dedicate oneself to the Eightfold Noble Path, those kinds of ritual activities, including more chanting, more meditation, and various types of penances...

It was this same chaplain who stated above that he feels some level of moral liability for the military's actions, and here explored how he formally utilizes ritual to acknowledge, hold, and process the burdens brought about by military service. In this way he works to address the tensions informed by the First Precept. Another chaplain spoke about his own selfcare practices, discovering comfort from both the spiritual resources from his tradition and from the individual connections that he is sometimes able to form.

When I give loving kindness and compassion to other people I sometimes have to apply it to myself too. It's the same thing. So when I help people, I care for myself at the same time. This motivates me because as human beings, we face suffering together. Everybody cries out. This is the first sign as we come to the world, we face suffering.

Another chaplain echoed almost this exact sentiment, stating "To have loving kindness is very important, not only that you have it for others but that you have it for yourself as well." While many of the chaplains interviewed held dedicated personal

practices which helped them address the burdens of their work, other chaplains did not see this as being enough to fully address the current situation and its myriad of tensions. The chaplain who spoke about the value of ritual above, went on to express how such rituals can bring about closeness among those who participate in them and expressed a desire for the healing that would come if he were able to receive the same type of care within his Buddhist-chaplain community as he provides to his service members.

I wish I could help put those rituals together for those who are currently serving. I know that I could certainly use it. The whole concept of doing something ritualistic in nature as a symbolic way of addressing my own failures in that arena, those tend to help more than certain other things or other avenues that I could take.

This points towards a larger desire among many of the chaplains for greater connection and mutual support among the Buddhist chaplain community at large. Through this larger integrated community, Buddhist chaplains would be able to address all the challenges discussed above. Even if none of the issues were fully resolved, they would be able to face them together, knowing that there are others who are immediately present and walking the same path. This thought was encapsulated by one chaplain when speaking about how to address chaplain isolation and integration.

I would like to invite all Buddhist military chaplains to a conference. Look for funding from my organization and have a conference and gather together. I need to think about what we are going to do with this. We cannot pretend that everything is OK, but if you don't solve this problem it will continue into the future. We need more Buddhist chaplains from different backgrounds to come up with a workable, acceptable, or meaningful approach to address all of this.

Other suggestions which this chaplain brought up for increasing support and connection within the Buddhist chaplain community included developing shared organizations, clinical training, and a willingness for others to continue educating the

public about the roles and responsibilities of military chaplains, both within and outside the military.

As a surprising and unrequested form of validation for this project itself, one of the chaplains concluded his interview by stating that this research about the First Precept itself could help address some of the burdens outlined above, stating,

In this situation I am really happy to see this precept of “Do not harm life” being talked about...Once you’re finished with your dissertation, I would love to read it since it is an important topic, because this can be really tough, about the precepts, and how we can learn from different perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

All together six structural and nine textual themes were discovered which informed an overall understanding of both the military chaplains and the context of their work, as well as how they understood their relationship and responsibility towards the First Precept. This ranged from both literal interpretations of not killing to a focus on compassionate support of all beings regardless of other considerations. These views were held within an understanding of real world practicalities ranging from a general understanding of the historical violent realities of human nature to the specific considerations of how chaplains operate within the command structure of the United States military. With these themes in hand, *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*, will further combine and refine these statements into an overall understanding and analysis of the primary research questions of how military chaplains engage with the First Precept.

## Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion

### Introduction and Overview: How to Understand the Data

Throughout *Chapter 4: Data Results*, passing comments were made about what specific statements represented or indicated in terms of the overall Buddhist military chaplain community, as well as how these trends might be understood through various Buddhist teachings. With the entirety of the data results now drawn together, a larger and more holistic understanding of Buddhist military chaplaincy and the First Precept can be explored. As discussed in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, the overall aim of this research is to attempt to understand the following questions. First, to understand what prompted these individuals to join an institution that ostensibly contradicts one of the foundational teachings of their self-espoused faith tradition. Second, to further explore the chaplains' own understanding of the tension between military service and the First Precept, and how they reconciled this seeming contradiction. Extending from this, the next question examines how the chaplains view their own direct responsibility towards the violence which is utilized by the military structures they support. Finally, this research explores the challenges and burdens which the chaplains face in this line of work, primarily due to these tensions.

The exploration of these questions utilized a mixed methodology approach of grounded theory and psychological phenomenology. Through the coding and analytic methods of grounded theory, the thematic elements or key essence of the chaplains' shared experiences were able to be brought together and examined. This process allowed for both the individual experiences of the chaplains to be maintained while also pointing

to larger themes shared by all members interviewed. Grounded theory was again utilized in drawing out the overarching challenges which the chaplains as a group appeared to face.

With the data drawn through these methodological processes, it is now possible to explore how these chaplains operate as informed by the Three Views, or *trisvabhava*, as presented in the *Lankavatara Sutra*. As outlined in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, the Three Views offer the challenge to engage with any topic, especially ethical inquiries, through the trifold understanding of literal interpretations, relational or compassionate viewpoints, and finally from a metaphysically absolute or ultimate understanding.

The first major section of this chapter will focus on a summary and interpretation of the data collected in this project. This major section will be divided into three components based on the ontological outlook of the Three Views. Drawing from the data condensed through psychological phenomenological methods, the first discussion will explore the First Precept from its literal interpretation, which usually focuses on the prohibition against the physical act of killing another living being. The second area of consideration will explore the chaplains' understanding of how the meaning of harm can shift to understanding and prohibiting other types of harm. In this view, harm can extend beyond the physical to include all forms of suffering, such as not harming emotions or mental stability, including relationships, motivations, intentions, or aspirations. Furthermore, this relational view must be considered in terms of how one's choices are harming oneself as well as others. Finally, a discussion of the absolute view and how all viewpoints might be used together when engaging the First Precept will be offered. This discussion explores how someone can be dedicated to the First Precept if, in the absolute

realm, every action if traced far enough forward or back, is at some point reliant on the death of something else, often both literal and relational.

The last major section of this chapter will explore how this research fits into the current academic landscape. This will first include a discussion on the limitations of this project, followed by an exploration of the academic relevance and areas of future research this project has opened. The discussion of future research will also include comments about more practical applications in how to utilize the findings of this project. This section, as well as this chapter, will then close with some concluding remarks before moving into the final chapter of this project.

### **Literal Understandings of the First Precept**

The first viewpoint in the *trivabhava* is that of the literal. Methodologically speaking, it is within this viewpoint that many of the structural aspects of chaplain service were uncovered and explored. The literal understanding of the First Precept will first take place in an overview of the chaplains and their backgrounds when taken as a whole, followed by a discussion of the typical routine duties of military service. This will then turn into a dedicated discussion of the chaplain's desire to serve others which was a consistent theme throughout all the chaplain interviews. This will lead into an exploration of the First Precept which, as the first vow which most Buddhists take, may be viewed by monastics and former monastics somewhat differently from lay people, and differently depending on the chaplain's relationship with their parent tradition. Finally, a

deeper inquiry into the role of mindfulness training and weapons use will be addressed before moving on to a discussion of the relational viewpoint of the First Precept.

### **Chaplain Background**

Most of the chaplains interviewed were first- or second-generation immigrants of Asian descent who all held graduate degrees in ministry. All except one were prior temple monastics, and many of them represented the United States Army. The chaplains represented a number of Buddhist traditions from across the spectrum of Theravada, Mahayana, and some Vajrayana traditions. All of the chaplains were endorsed by the Buddhist Churches of America, a Jodo Shinshu or Japanese Pure Land denomination. This opened two areas of interest as Buddhist chaplaincy continues to develop in the United States. The first is both the need and the curiosity of how chaplaincy will develop when further Buddhist endorsing organizations are established and begin to provide denomination-specific support and oversight to their own chaplains. The second is what changes might be witnessed as more chaplains who are enculturated in American society from birth enter the ranks of chaplaincy, coupled with any subtle or not-so-subtle impacts if these chaplains happen to be Caucasian as well.

As described in *Theme A: Who are the Chaplains?*, a condensed representative exploration of the chaplains who participated in this research was,

I came to the US as a Buddhist monk. At that time, I just wanted to study English, so the perfect way to be among American people was by working at my Buddhist temple. I had experience in Buddhism already, so I wanted to have a different experience and challenged myself by joining the military...I wanted to challenge myself and bring my experience and share my work with others who might need it. So, I came into the candidate program...and afterwards I came to active duty as a chaplain.

### **Daily Functions: Advise, Serve, and Facilitate**

Psychological phenomenology was employed in order to preserve the unique situations where chaplains operate, however through the interview process it appeared that many of the daily functions expressed through the structural themes were very similar. As noted before, this is likely due to the structured nature of military service and the uniformity encouraged by all military branches. Chaplains fulfill a prescribed role in the United States military and so this role is unsurprisingly similar in most situations, regardless of location. There are differences in function which will be explored below, however the first major understanding from this research is that even given the opportunity to fully explore differences in experience which are offered through phenomenological methodology, the resulting differences were minor. This can certainly be impacted by sample size, as discussed in *Chapter 3: Methodology* and will be explored again towards the end of this chapter, however, a potentially equally valid conclusion is that the United States military is generally successful in its goal of uniformity in operations among its ranks. This included the chaplains. All of the chaplains regardless of branch of service demonstrated relatively similar functions and routines. As laid out in regulation, the purpose of the chaplain's presence in any military structure is to provide, facilitate, advise, and support in accordance with the "manner and form" of their endorsing agency and religious tradition. As a chaplain stated in *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*,

The responsibility of the Chaplain Corps is to provide for your own community, the Buddhist community, and facilitate for other groups. Second, provide care and spiritual counseling, and then give command advice on the ethics, morality, or religious cultures in different places.

With minor differences in schedule, they would arrive at work and usually start the day with departmental and command briefings. Departmental meetings would focus on administration and scheduling, which the chaplains would take an active role in. Command briefings would usually see the chaplains in an observational role to the discussions of the overall mission.<sup>190</sup> Only on occasion would chaplains be called upon to brief the command on service member morale, impact from recent events, or comments on the local culture if in the field.

While chaplains would be able to seek out private meetings with the commanding officer if necessary, and would also provide direct spiritual support upon request, it was at these command briefs that chaplains would most often fulfill their role to advise as the moral, and to a lesser degree, cultural, voice for the command. The chaplain's role would be to speak up for both the troops as well as voice any concerns about proposed actions. In terms of maintaining moral or ethical standards, this appeared through the interviews to mostly take the role of bearing witness to discussions of violence without active participation.

As described in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*, many of the chaplains interviewed held the perception that a chaplain's role in most commanding officer's eyes was to support mission readiness through ensuring troop resiliency, and so usually any concerns brought up by the chaplains would be couched in terms of working to change

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<sup>190</sup> When I was a Chaplain Candidate in the Navy, one chaplain recounted to me how command briefings were held in a room with limited seating, with many staff sitting in chairs behind the main table. The previous chaplain had been mostly invisible to the command. The new chaplain decided to take his name plate from his office and set it at the main table with the CO and the other higher-ranking command staff. The CO was surprised, but did not request the chaplain move to the outer seating, and the new chaplain became an active member of the command. He created his own literal "seat at the table."

the perspective and motivation of the troops as they approached a specific mission rather than changing the mission to better support the troops' own wellbeing. As one chaplain recalled from the above theme,

I saw a lot of suffering and a really big need for spirituality, especially in the command team. They can sometimes be really cold-blooded. Get the mission done, that's number one. There is no negotiation, no matter what, and chaplains are there to represent some kind of value, some compassion.

As the interviews implied, the commanding officer was the ultimate authority and mission accomplishment the ultimate priority, with all other concerns, including morality, ethics, or troop wellbeing, taking a backseat. As one of the chaplains stated, "What the commanding officer wants, the commanding officer gets."

Afterwards, the chaplains would directly engage in one of their next overall priorities, namely supporting troop readiness and resiliency. This was accomplished by physically accompanying the units they were assigned to, in either their workspaces or in the field. The chaplains would attend training evolutions and physical fitness sessions. During these times, the chaplains would offer general support and encouragement to whoever they encountered. This would serve the dual purpose of both supporting their assigned troops in mission accomplishment and in gaining a direct understanding of the morale and challenges that were currently facing the command. Other parts of the day would be spent in one-on-one encounters with individual service members, and clearing any administrative duties such as preparing and submitting reports, liaising with community members, or event planning. Throughout both the group and individual support activities, the ultimate goal was in assisting all service members to sustain operations and complete assigned duties, while attempting to counteract some of the

more troubling command tendencies as outlined in *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*. As one chaplain stated,

I have been in so many units where the leadership or certain senior ranking leaders will come in and say, “We need killers,” and I say, “No you don’t – no you don’t need killers, you need warriors.” Know the difference and know when it’s appropriate and when it’s not appropriate to kill.

The chaplains interviewed operated under the command’s assumption that mission accomplishment down to the individual level was a foregone conclusion, the only question was in how it would be completed.<sup>191</sup>

Another priority for military chaplaincy is to provide for their congregation’s own religious needs and to facilitate meeting the religious needs of other traditions. This was most often fulfilled by preparing and offering a dedicated Buddhist religious service at some point during the week, and occasionally also offering other mindfulness or chanting groups at some other time. As discovered during the interviews, most of the chaplains performed their religious service on Sundays, with one major exception in *Theme F: Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains*, when a chaplain viewed this specific timing as an act of oppression by the Christian majority.<sup>192</sup>

I will not do religious services on the weekend simply for the fact that that was a way of oppressing us as Buddhist for a very very long time, since

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<sup>191</sup> As a Hospital Corpsman, I often witnessed sailors being put on one-to-one watch for self-harm. The sitter had to come from the patient’s own department. If someone was admitted, then their department would lose the workforce of two sailors. This made departmental leadership resistant in “allowing” any of their sailors to come to us for psychological problems and pressure the Medical Department to clear the sailor for full duty as soon as possible. This also made the sailors who needed help carry the extra burden of being very unpopular among their shipmates and leadership when they returned to their departments.

<sup>192</sup> I led Buddhist chanting on Wednesdays. The timing of my service was due to space limitations. At sea, Sunday morning until 13:00 was the only “holiday routine” (free time) during the week, and so the only time when most sailors could attend services. While having holiday routine on Sunday is clearly due to Christian influence, I personally did not feel the timing was part of a cycle of oppression. I did feel this pressure when I first attempted to start my chanting group. My request was thrown back in my face by the Chaplain Assistant. I had to speak to a chaplain, i.e. an officer, to get it off the ground.

we would not be allowed to practice if we were not doing the good Christian thing and just worshipping on Sundays like everybody else. I won't do services on the weekend, period. I'm not going to continue the cycle of oppression.

Hand in hand with providing a Buddhist-specific service, facilitating free exercise of religion led to chaplains who were one-of-one at their command to liaise with other duty stations or community-based partners to provide religious services to troops from other traditions.<sup>193</sup> An additional duty for Navy Chaplains at sea was being on the rotation for nightly prayers at taps.<sup>194</sup> As described in the regulations presented in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, chaplains of any faith tradition would not carry arms as bearing weapons is explicitly prohibited by US military regulations.

### **A Desire to Serve**

A literal interpretation of the First Precept is the easiest viewpoint to discuss because all of the chaplains in their work as chaplains were not directly killing other human beings. As outlined in the *Pratimoksha* and other texts discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, from this perspective the First Precept was fully upheld.

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<sup>193</sup> I served this role myself, performing Buddhist services for several years at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, since there were no permanently assigned Buddhist chaplains at this command. Another example of this was when I was deployed in the Persian Gulf, a Catholic chaplain from Naval Station Bahrain was flown out to the different ships in our task group once a month for Catholic-specific confession and communion.

<sup>194</sup> Every night at 21:55 the bosun's mate would announce over the IMC (intercom) "Tattoo, tattoo. Standby for the evening prayer" and the chaplain would give a prayer. The chaplains would take turns each night and offer a blessing. Sometimes a traditional Christian prayer, sometimes a short story, and one chaplain would always first tell a joke and in one breath say the punchline quickly followed by "let us pray..." The prayer would be less than 5 mins, since the bosun's mate would announce lights out at exactly 22:00. Normal lights would be turned off, red lights turned on, but that didn't mean we'd necessarily get to stop working. Leadership could keep day shift working until 23:59 without being required to grant extra rest time the next day, meaning we would often be dismissed at exactly 23:59.

While it might be argued that this is the easiest gateway for the chaplains to pass through, it does not make it any less important. When outlining the impact of engaging in violence and killing, the sutras discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review* demonstrated that violent actions usually so cloud the mind and enflame attachments of anger, guilt, and hatred that it becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to move forward along the path of awakening. While some chaplains mentioned the type of excitement that is often portrayed accompanying violence as a reason that younger people might consider military service, all the chaplains interviewed cited compassion for others and their suffering as their own primary motivation for joining the military. As described in *Theme A: Who are the Chaplains?*, this desire to serve others was mostly focused on wanting to help others process suffering and hopefully lead to a positive impact on the future choices of the service members. Speaking in the third-person, one chaplain's written comment stated,

He believes that “the most honorable job in this world is serving people.” When he was aware of the need for chaplains, he volunteered to fulfill his goal to bring peace to the world.

While this desire to serve was couched in different terms and references to different Buddhist figures, to help others relieve their suffering was a universal discovery among the chaplains.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> This was also my own motivation to become a Buddhist chaplain, however while on active duty I usually conceptualized it as a question of access. Very few people have permission to board Navy ships or enter Navy bases. I therefore viewed my Bodhisattva Path as asking if I did not serve those who I had unique access to, then who would? It was only many years later that I found this same sentiment of “If I don't go, then who will?” echoed in *Khsitagarba Sutra*. Jeanne Tsai, *The Original Vows of Khsitagarba Sutra* (Hacienda Heights: Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center, 2014), ix-x.

From a literal perspective, serving others fully upholds the First Precept, however this leads to new considerations surrounding what the troops are going to do with the teachings they receive, and therefore how the chaplains will engaged with them in a supportive relationship. Most of the chaplains discussed helping their troops become more grounded and preparing them to deal with the stresses of future military service which, for some, would directly include combat, violence, and killing. When discussing the role of killing in the military, both Mahayana and Theravada chaplains brought up the figure of Angulimala. In *Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing*, one chaplain stated,

When people already killed, first you need to forgive yourself and let it go. Understand that the karma is already done, but the most important thing is that new karma can be created which will help with healing and coping. I always use the story of Angulimala. He already killed others, but he needed to forgive himself and learn about the present. In the end he was completely free from mental suffering.

Angulimala is an excellent figure to serve as an example that no past mistake will ever place someone beyond the reach of future actions towards healing, and he was often used as an example in helping troops engaged with past burdens. At the same time, there is one aspect of his story which was left out of the discussion when he was used in relationship to the military. While it is true that Angulimala had killed many people prior to becoming a disciple of the Buddha, he did not learn from the Buddha for the purpose of killing again in the future. It is not unreasonable to assume that some soldiers who came to the Buddhist chaplains may have been preparing to kill in the future, and so Angulimala as a figure to uphold in a military context appears to lose some of its veracity. The chaplains appeared aware of this tension, and their discussion turned

towards the second viewpoint, that of the relational/compassionate, when asked how they understand their support of those who are preparing for violence, and this viewpoint will be explored more below.

### **The Home Community and Monastic Status**

Returning to the structural overview of the chaplains' experiences, how their military service operated in relation to each of the chaplain's parent Buddhist tradition looked different between participants. Within these differences was a clear doctrinal divide between Theravada practitioners and their Mahayana and Vajrayana counterparts. All Theravada chaplains discussed the need to disrobe and no longer be officially recognized as monastics in order to become chaplains, coupled with a now curtailed spiritual authority to perform certain ritualistic actions. All Mahayana and Vajrayana participants stated that their military service had no impact on their monastic status. This applied to all research participants except for one who had not formally served as a temple monastic prior to commissioning as a chaplain. This was an unsurprising and expected aspect of military service as a chaplain. However, a somewhat surprising theme that arose during several of the Mahayana interviews was the notion that since the individual chaplain took the precepts it was up to the individual to either keep or break them. Therefore it was a personal decision about one's monastic status and did not pertain to their parent tradition's opinions or oversight. Commenting on both Mahayana and Theravada perspectives in *Theme B: Being a Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader*, one chaplain stated,

Buddhist chaplains and Buddhist monks are the same if they are still keeping their precepts and keep their vows. Beside the precepts, we also have the Bodhisattva Vows in Mahayana for monastics. So, I would say that Buddhist monks and Buddhist chaplains would depend on the tradition they come from. In Theravada traditions when they disrobe to put on the military uniform, they are no longer monastics, but in my tradition, I am still a monastic. I am still a chaplain. I am keeping my precepts, and this is a kind of difference between the traditions.

This demonstrated that some of the chaplains viewed their precepts from both a personal and an institutional perspective. While taking the precepts made them a part of their chosen Buddhist institution, when the monastics chose to leave the temple to become chaplains, even if they disrobed, they all maintained most of the overriding ethical precepts they had operated under as monastics. Especially for non-Theravada chaplains, it appeared that it did not matter whether or not their vows were recognized by an external organization. The precepts continued to guide and inform their actions and their identity.

This internalization did not appear to apply to every behavioral rule that governs monastic life, which can be inferred from one of the quoted statements from the same theme about transparency and communication with one's home community if a chaplain decides to marry.

Like I said, be transparent, be open. If you want to disrobe and get married that's OK, no one will say you're wrong. That is your own life. Just ordain as a lay Buddhist minister. But if you just keep quiet, if you encounter struggles, or questions or issues, we have to speak up.

At the same time, several chaplains made statements about how their precepts are their own business and no one else's, including their Buddhist denomination's. One chaplain stated in *Theme B: Being a Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader*, "I told them I'm learning from my master, but he has a different way, and I have my own

skillful means, a different way to conduct my business.” This was further enforced in

*Theme C: Buddhist Doctrine and Teachings*, by a chaplain who stated,

The First Precept applies to me directly because I’m the one who received the precept. And second, the soldiers are not Buddhist, so regardless I am the one responsible for my karma and for my actions. I’m the one that made that choice and when I made that choice, I took responsibility for that choice.

This was surprising as temple structures and student-teacher relationships in most established Buddhist traditions are very hierarchical, and it is considered very much your temple’s or your teacher’s business what you are doing, especially as an ordained monastic. Several chaplains did discuss the concerns their congregations had regarding the chaplain’s choice to join the military. This appeared to demonstrate that at least from the congregation’s perspective, the chaplain’s precepts and choice to join the military was not considered only a private decision for the monastic. In *Theme A: Who are the Chaplains?*, one participant stated,

When I joined it became an argument among my Buddhist community. As a monk you're not supposed to take a full-time job, not supposed to work outside the temple. That was one thing, the other thing is as a monk you're not supposed to go into the military. After ten years people finally got used to it.

This discussion of the relationship between the chaplains and their home communities will be encountered again during the discussion of the second of the Three Views, the relational/compassionate below.

Ultimately, this phenomenon implied that while the precepts are often spoken about as external rules imposed on an individual – and at the beginning of one’s spiritual practice this might be true – for many of the chaplains interviewed, these precepts had already been internalized and formed part of their self-identity prior to their

commissioning in the military. Despite any minutia about whether a chaplain was a formally recognized monastic in their tradition, all the chaplains clearly identified as full-fledged religious leaders.

The discussion of monastic status appeared to mark the beginning of a divergence of understanding among those interviewed. Divergences were again discovered surrounding the use of weapons in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*. All participants noted with appreciation that as chaplains they were not allowed to touch weapons, however some of the participants discussed using firearms when serving as prior-enlisted and stated that this did not violate their First Precept as it occurred within a training environment and no human beings were killed.

I had heard about boot camp, but I had never imagined that I would put myself in that situation where I was in boot camp. There, they asked me to touch weapons, and I said, "What? I didn't sign a contract to touch weapons. I'm a monk. I can't do that kind of thing." But they said I signed a contract so there is no way to back out and I said, "Really." And they said they signed me up, so I became a soldier.

Scripturally speaking, this becomes a more clouded area, especially within a literal viewpoint. From the discussion in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, there are specific sutras and monastic rules which prohibit even touching weapons. As one of the interviewees pointed out, some Buddhist organizations are more conservative in their views and interpretations of Buddhist tradition than others, making such actions as handling weapons even in a training environment a potential point of tension. Overall, this conversation begins to point towards an overarching theme which most of those interviewed explored, namely an ongoing disconnect from their home communities. These disconnects appear to be due to a number of reasons, ranging from doctrinal

disagreements to physical separation, and will also be discussed further in the following major section on compassionate and relational viewpoints.

### **Mindfulness and Weapons Training**

While the issue of personally using weapons can be sidestepped, since none of the chaplains are in a position to use weapons due to their status as non-combatants, the chaplains in their role of supporting troop resiliency rubbed up against a further point of contention regarding weapons. This focused on the question of whether chaplains as chaplains should help train their service members in the use of arms, mostly through mindfulness techniques. The question of mindfulness and weapons points to a tension within the viewpoints themselves, namely how to balance literal and relational/compassionate priorities which will be discussed much more thoroughly below, as each viewpoint can lead to different recommendations in the same situation. In terms of weapons use, many of the sacred texts outlined in *Chapter 2: Literature Review* explicitly state that not only killing but even the handling of weapons is a violation of the first precept. Some of those texts, such as the *Mahavagga*, extend this understanding of the First Precept to include helping others learn to kill when it states that a monastic is someone who has “laid aside violence against creatures firm and frail, not killing or making others kill.”<sup>196</sup> Most of the chaplains, as outlined in *Theme 3: Carrying Weapons*, saw themselves upholding this standard.

That was one of the reasons I decided to join the military, because we don't touch guns, we don't carry a gun, and we don't fight. That's the beautiful work of a chaplain, otherwise I probably wouldn't have joined the military.

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<sup>196</sup> Sujato, “Mahavagga.”

While modern chaplains can argue they are not killing, it is harder to claim they are not assisting others to kill when they teach mindfulness techniques to people who are explicitly training to kill others, in order to help them better use their weapons. At the same time, in the *Ugrapariṣṭha Sūtra*, a text which it is important to note is only found in the Mahayana canon, states that a bodhisattva, when faced with the question of giving, even if what is asked for is a direct violation of the precepts, should resolve this ethical conflict by prioritizing the giving, i.e. the relationship and compassion above a literal interpretation of the precepts.<sup>197</sup>

Overall, there did appear to be an overreliance on a literal interpretation of the First Precept to skirt issues of personal responsibility within a military structure. There could be several reasons for this, beginning with an understanding that strict adherence to a yes-o-no precept may be a way to shield more emotional decision making when a full ethical framework is either not present or not desired.<sup>198</sup> Another understanding might be that it indicates a form of spiritual bypass, allowing some individuals to avoid difficult situations or deeper introspection when their own conscience or tradition might conflict with a deeper understanding of the impact of one's own actions. An overriding theme throughout this first section is the commonality in form and function of all the chaplains, again indicating that the military as a whole has great experience in forcing conformity. As one chaplain stated in *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship*, "Here you have to motivate people to do something (fight), so this is a method to socialize them, a

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<sup>197</sup> Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 110.

<sup>198</sup> Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 38.

propaganda way.” While this comment is pointing towards the training experience of enlisted members, chaplains also go through several months of the officer-equivalent of boot camp, which uses the same mechanisms to ensure allegiance and compliance to the military. A literal viewpoint offers a way out, a way to ostensibly declare one’s full allegiance to the ideals and understandings of Buddhist tradition while at the same time allowing the demands and focus of the military institution as a whole to remain unimpeded. If such a dynamic is at play, this type of spiritual bypass may feed into the burdens of the chaplain, which will be discussed below. A final understanding of this overreliance may rather be that regardless of how one understands the First Precept, especially for a mostly former-monastic sample group, a literal interpretation of this precept remains the first gateway that these chaplains must pass through before any other considerations may be made.

### **Conclusion**

Through this overview of the general context in which the chaplains served, both the commonalities and differences faced by each member are beginning to clarify. The above discussion also demonstrates both the value and the shortcomings of only using a single viewpoint in the *trivabhava*, when looking at any given situation. From the literal viewpoint, the chaplains are in line with a fundamental understanding of the First Precept. The *Mahavagga*, shown above to censure the use of weapons, was cited as one chaplain’s motivation for becoming a chaplain when he quoted his desire to “Go forth, o monks, for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for

the world, for the good, for the benefit and happiness of devas and men.”<sup>199</sup> This specific chaplain did not advocate for the use of mindfulness for weapons training, but had trained in weapons use as a prior-enlisted service member. In this situation it is hard to view how training others in weapons use would uplift the welfare and happiness of all beings, yet it is also disingenuous for anyone who has interviewed these chaplains to believe that acting on the above quoted aspiration is an intention to cause harm or increase the suffering of those around them. This demonstrates the limitations of a purely literal interpretation. As will be discussed below, a chaplain’s refusal to assist their service members even in the use of weapons could lead to increased harm and suffering of those under the chaplain’s care when considering the internal dynamics of the military. In the face of such contradictory viewpoints, the second view of the relational/compassionate may be able to offer further guidance in the question of ethical behavior for chaplains in the military.

### **Relational and Compassionate Understandings of the First Precept**

The second view espoused by the *trivabhava* is that of a relational and compassionate understanding. Here the ethical consideration becomes broader and extends beyond purely physical harm. This section will outline some initial considerations when shifting from a literal to a relationship viewpoint of the precepts. With an understanding of this shift, a dedicated discussion of command relationships will take place and how this impacts chaplain operations. This relational discussion will then

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<sup>199</sup> I. B. Horner, *The Book of Discipline*, vol. 4, *Mahavagga* (Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 2007), 28.

shift from the command to how chaplains navigate interfaith engagement coupled with the use of non-judgement. Following up on the literal discussion of mindfulness and weapons training, a relational and compassion viewpoint on this question will then be offered. Finally, a discussion of the burdens of isolation and community and how this impacts an understanding of the First Precept will be presented before some concluding remarks about the relational/compassionate viewpoint overall.

### **Initial Considerations**

While the First Precept is based in a preservation of biological life, Buddhism, through its teachings on impermanence and emptiness, and its path of awakening through mental and spiritual clarity, has as its universal foundation the understanding that human beings are more than just their physical bodies. If people are more than simply flesh and bone, then they must care for the non-physical, i.e. the mental and spiritual aspects of themselves as well. Harming these parts of their holistic being would lead to the same type of spiritual and emotional damage that injuring or killing the physical bodies of others can cause, for both perpetrator and victim alike. The *trivabhava* therefore extends the reach of the First Precept to include any action which negatively impacts someone else, be it physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. The First Precept now takes into account the overall wellbeing of others and asks that everyone be aware of how actions impact relationships, as well as how actions impact other people's relationship to that person's own unique situation. In this context, the guiding principle in upholding the First Precept is now to use compassion as a lens to understand the larger effects of an individual's action or inaction. As will be discussed, this use of compassion

should be considered in all relationships, both in the relationship between the chaplains and others, as well as the internal relationship of the chaplains towards themselves.

As mentioned above, all the chaplains discussed joining the military out of a desire to serve others, to be with them in their suffering and perhaps attempt to alleviate it as well. This motivation fits well within the relational view of the *trivabhava*. In *Theme B: Buddhist Doctrines and Teachings*, one of the chaplains equated the suffering of service members to Khsitagarba Bodhisattva, who accompanies those suffering the torments of hell, torments which directly speak to harm and the First Precept. It is in this relationship that the mental, emotional, and spiritual harm that is already being endured can begin to be addressed.<sup>200</sup> From this viewpoint, it could then be said that choosing not to become a chaplain when all other conditions align towards this path would cause harm through inaction, and so a new perspective may be that refusing to be a chaplain could be challenged by the First Precept. While this conception of relationship was not explicitly voiced by the chaplains, their desire to help others aligns with this relational view of suffering and how to alleviate it.

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<sup>200</sup> This can incorporate physical pain too. In bootcamp, recruits can volunteer for the evening prayer. At one point I did and prayed that we be able to accept our situation and change our perspectives about the stresses of a new environment, knowing that our own reactions of resistance were the primary source of our distress, and hence we each had the power to immediately find relief. Even aching muscles could be looked at with joy, as a sign of growing stronger. Later, my drill instructors passed around my dog tags between themselves before giving them to me to see what my religious tradition was. I had not engaged in a formal study of Buddhism yet, and later found this exact teaching in *The Arrow Sutra*. Sujato, “An Arrow (SN 36.6),” Sutta Central, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/sn36.6/en/sujato>.

### **Navigating Command Relationships**

The chaplains all explored ethical decisions which were made through an assumption of the importance of relationship. Relationship and compassion as the gateway through which the act of service and an explicit addressing of harm, physical and otherwise, could be engaged, can be seen throughout the spectrum of chaplain responsibilities. As mentioned above, one of the chaplain's responsibilities was to provide moral guidance for a command. The chaplains reported this primarily taking place through attending briefings and command meetings which are necessarily relational. Only through establishing and maintaining a relationship with the commanding officer and other members of staff would the chaplains be able to voice their guidance in a way that might be heard. A common parlance for this, when discussing a chaplain's ability to integrate into a team is getting "a seat at the table." As outlined in *Chapter 1: Introduction, Problem, and Purpose*, chaplains operate in vocational rather than religious settings and so they are usually an ancillary service to the organization they support, be it the military, healthcare, prison or educational system. While they may have the right to be with the group they serve based on officer rank or organizational structure, a true integrated seat at the table is not guaranteed and might not even be considered by the primary professionals they work with. Only through relationship backed by leadership skills and pastoral authority can chaplains arrive at a place where their voice is heard. This tension was noted in *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*, when one chaplain described clashing with the command's desires for killers, while this tension was navigated with silence by a different chaplain in the same theme,

Even if you are an officer and you're in the meeting and hear about tactics and plans to attack, we need to be aware that we are not to give any advice, or feel happy, or help them attack. No, we should not say that. We better keep silent, quiet, be a mindful presence.

When this happens, relationship becomes not only the gateway through which the First Precept can be practiced but is also the mechanism by which the First Precept is practiced. The extent to which the chaplains' viewpoints will be heeded will be magnified due to the strength of the relationship itself. The chaplains interviewed all utilized this process with differing degrees of success. Many of them implied that perhaps they were not called on as much as they would have appreciated when discussing troop welfare, and other chaplains expressed having to utilize their pastoral authority to directly engage leadership who appeared too bent on glorifying violence. Had these chaplains not felt compelled to engage their leadership due to a literal understanding of the First Precept, such command tendencies would be left unchecked. In order to minimize harm through the chaplain's guidance there would need to be a relationship with the command team first. Through this relationship and chaplain presence, a reminder can be offered that it is possible for a consideration of others, be it a consideration for the people and places where fighting is taking place, or a consideration for the troops themselves within the command. This sentiment was stated by one participant in *Theme 8: Killing May Be Permissible*,

They tend to like killers, and I have to sit there and make sure that I am combating that to ensure that they are still doing things morally and ethically, in as moral and ethical a way as best and as often as I possibly can.

The minimization of harm is a topic that will be further explored when discussing the absolute viewpoint of the *trivabhava*, while here it can be concluded that

if compassion is the metric by which an action is deemed harmful or not according to the First Precept, then the chaplains all met this moral obligation to be present with the command.

A final consideration on command relationship was that only one chaplain stated directly in *Theme E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship* that his top priority were the human beings in the military and rejected command objectives as the focus of his work, stating, “I am not here for the Army. I am not here for the military. I could care less about both of those entities. I am here 100% solely to take care of the human beings who are in the military.” This overall silence on the morality of the military itself is understandable from a relational perspective as chaplains would doubtless be hesitant to be publicly overcritical of the institution whose uniform they are wearing and to whom they had taken an oath to uphold and defend. Such a stance may alienate the chaplains from those who need their help and close down the hearts of those they might be trying to reach. In such a situation, by rejecting the military outright, they would lose their place at the table, cutting off those who might otherwise have heeded their guidance. At the same time, as will be seen below, when the chaplains discuss giving advice to family members this hesitance to speak out directly about the deficiencies in the military did not appear to demonstrate an over-zealous patriotism, but rather a prioritizing of the preservation of relationship and ensuring access to those who need help. Within a more private setting, such as the family, the chaplains demonstrated a clear moral stance towards the value of military service, which will be discussed below.

This also brings up the question of dual relationships overall. The above discussion assumes that one’s responsibilities towards Buddhism are paramount, and this

may be an easy assumption to make given the monastic histories of most of these chaplains. Despite this, it is entirely possible that some chaplains now or in the future may view their military responsibilities towards the United States with equal intensity to their faith obligations. As one chaplain stated in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*,

However, we live in a culture where the Army's mission is to "fight and win the nation's wars." Whenever we view the high chain of command, they are all ready to fight and win the nation's war, which involves killing. As a chaplain we say that we are neutral and we respect life, but we are in an organization of fighting and killing to win wars.

As quoted above from *Theme E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship*, the only time in this research when there was a clear differentiation between command priorities and Buddhist outlook, the participant sided explicitly with the Buddhist focus on addressing individual suffering. The tension in this dual relationship cannot be ignored, however, especially when support of mission objectives is one of the most direct ways of gaining access to the command in a way that might lead to institutional change. The chaplains, in their discussion of representing moral authority, however, appeared to understand that if this happened, it would occur on an individual rather than institutional level.

While the chaplains appeared aware of their limits to influence the overall command, the potential impact of viewing the First Precept in a relational or compassionate perspective appeared to blossom in their interactions with their fellow service members. As previously mentioned, the chaplains' desire to serve rested on a foundation of compassion. Whereas compassion was embodied through moral authority when dealing with the command, when engaging with other service members compassion instead began as a process of non-judgement. Many of the chaplains interviewed spoke about how non-judgement served as an access point for relationship with others who

would likely have refused chaplain services otherwise, such as in *Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing*, when one participant stated, "They tend to become, as it were, my regulars as soon as they know that I am not going to judge them for what they've done." Precepts, when viewed from a literal perspective are explicitly judgmental – Do not kill – however as they shift towards relational perspectives, non-judgement becomes the method through which the benefits of the precepts may be realized. Non-judgement helped the chaplains engage with service members who had closed down due to the judgements of others and were left isolated in their own suffering. For the chaplains to utilize a literal interpretation of the First Precept towards those who had enacted violence on others, the result would have been further isolation and continued suffering of the service member. Instead, non-judgement based on compassion and relationship allowed the service members to accept support from the chaplain, offering the potential to decrease the ongoing harm that their previous actions had caused to their wellbeing. Even with a literal interpretation of the First Precept, a choice to do nothing can be understood as an intentional action, and so the First Precept obligates the chaplain, through the use of non-judgement, not to abandon those around them who are suffering or leave them to continue to suffer the ongoing harm of their burdens.

### **Navigating Interfaith Relationships**

Another interesting contradiction which appeared to be at work when relying on non-judgement was discovered when the chaplains compared their actions and outlooks to those of chaplains from other religious traditions. In *Theme F: Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains*, one of the Buddhist chaplains recounted how primarily

Christian chaplains resisted the idea that ultimate meaning or purpose could be found within each individual, instead stating that it must come from an external source and that therefore values and meaning must be exactly the same for all people, stating,

One thing that I learned they opposed was when the Army came out with new regulations called “Holistic Health and Fitness.” In that, there is a spiritual domain that says spirituality gives a sense of connection to all people to help them identify their own values, belief, purpose, and meaning for their lives. A majority of Christian chaplains oppose that idea, because they received a calling from God to spread the gospel. They have to save people. They think people can’t choose for themselves what their meaning is. For Buddhists, we don’t have that concept, so that is why it is easy for us to engage with soldiers from different faiths, different religions, and different perspectives. They are happy to receive me, and I see the way that I influence them without telling them, “Hey, you have to listen to me as a Buddhist chaplain.”

Here it is the Christian chaplain’s moral obligation to attempt to turn other service members away from wherever they found meaning and encourage them to accept Christianity’s own homogenous truth. This insistence on having access to an ultimate truth which the service members needed to conform to resulted in resistance against those teachings and a shutting down of relationship. This seemed especially prevalent when the supposed universal truths espoused by the Christian chaplains did not match the service member’s lived experience. This dynamic was expressed in *Theme E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship* by a chaplain who stated,

When I introduce myself as a chaplain they turned their head away, but then they are curious about my insignia, and I say I’m a Buddhist chaplain, and they turn around and talk to me. Because I don’t tell them about the teachings of the Buddha, they come and ask me themselves, and I can ask them and guide them to their understanding of their meaning and their purpose and their values.

In terms of the First Precept, this insistence on proselytization and utilizing preconceived assumptions of meaning harmed relationship. The Buddhist chaplains,

however, utilizing non-judgment and, operating under the assumption that others could find meaning for themselves, were able to establish relationship based on compassion and mutual respect. This allowed for connection and exploration of the sources of suffering in the service members. Surprisingly, the sources of suffering which the service members were feeling, such as the spiritual damage received by perpetrating violence, usually aligned with the teachings of the chaplain's Buddhist tradition. The use of non-judgement also meant that the chaplains rarely needed to use Buddhist doctrinal language or tradition-specific wording. As one chaplain stated in *Theme E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship*,

Mostly they were really into meditation, I called them relaxation techniques. I don't really teach exclusive to Buddhism, since we say that we affirm and provide. We serve all soldiers... Everyone can relate to relaxation. I don't use the name karma or *sila* or Buddhist wisdom, but I do say virtue, concentration, wisdom. Any soldier can relate to that. I don't say God or Buddha, I say, "The Lord," so anyone can have their own lord.

In this way, relationships were established regardless of tradition. One chaplain, in *Theme B: A Military Chaplain and a Buddhist Religious Leader*, demonstrated a radical and doctrinally supported view of non-judgement and acceptance of other's sources of meaning which was so important in his home tradition that there was a dedicated monastic precept requiring him to adjust his support to fit within the local outlook and needs of the service members. This respect for other forms of meaning allowed the chaplain to utilize a Buddhist framework to uplift the service member's own autonomy and begin the process of working together in reframing the service member's own experiences. This process was outlined in the context of moral injury in *Theme E: Daily Activities and Enlisted Relationship*,

From my understanding of Buddhism, I have a framework to help someone with that. It's called moral injury, because the soldier killed an enemy and that also violates or contradicts his own core values, which creates a moral dissonance and moral injury. As a chaplain with compassion, I help that soldier and I provide support and an environment for that soldier to process and transform that kind of injury.

Since this work of helping others did not have an insistence on conversion, the chaplains were still able to uphold the service member's own truths and offer support without such support contradicting either the service member's or the chaplain's own internal values. This not only allowed the service members to begin a journey towards new self-understandings, but also, as sometimes reported in *Theme F: Relationship with Other (Non-Buddhist) Chaplains*, uplifted and supported the chaplains themselves,

They don't need to believe what I believe, and they don't need to practice what I practice. We can meet in the middle as service members and also as human beings. When I help them, sometimes I help myself. When I see a soldier come to me and they are suffering, but when they walk out and they are smiling, that makes me feel better too.

Although there were mechanisms through which Buddhist chaplains were able to offer support unique to their spiritual tradition, overall the chaplains appeared to be aware of an ongoing tension between themselves and assumed Christian normative standards. As already mentioned above, one chaplain viewed the insistence on holding religious services on Sunday as an act of oppression which he actively resisted. While a direct engagement with Christian hegemony could be avoided, it could not be ignored. In *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*, one chaplain expressed this sentiment directly and succinctly.

The other thing is that in Asian culture you never question, and you always accept quietly. So, when Asian monastics join military chaplaincy, they never question. I want to find out what Buddhist chaplains are doing in a Christian-dominated

context, and what does it mean to do interfaith work? So that is what we need to think about and find a solution for. We cannot pretend that this doesn't happen.

The conclusion that this chaplain draws, that Buddhist chaplains need more internal forms of support, will be discussed in much more detail below, in this chapter below, in *Compassion, Personal Isolation, and Chaplain Community*.

### **Compassion and Non-Judgement**

This relational viewpoint also sheds light on the relationship between service members and the overall harm of the military. In both *Theme 1: What is the First Precept?* and *Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing*, chaplains spoke about livelihood which may entail killing in food production while another discussed recreational hunting. Both chaplains came to the same conclusion, that it is inappropriate to proactively criticize others even if their actions caused the death of other beings. This sentiment was also expressed above when discussing non-judgement and working with those who have killed, either intentionally or unintentionally, in the past. In *Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing*, on chaplain stated,

I listen to them and don't blame them. I give them compassion and skills for those who have had those difficulties, especially if they've come back from war and already killed a lot of people and feel guilty. I'm going to use the tools – he already understands what he's done – to point him in the right direction to be able to release that suffering.

Criticizing others effectively destroys relationship and connection, inhibiting the chances of future learning from taking place. All the chaplains were willing to offer the teachings when asked, but the preservation of relationship was seen as a priority. In the same theme, another participant continued, “We can guide them to awareness and to

make that a point of meaning, rather than a point of condemnation.” In such a situation it became more important to preserve relationship in order to not jeopardize future opportunities to offer support when the service members may need it or when the member might be in a better position to truly contemplate their situation, actions, and motivations.

Overall, there was only one chaplain who explicitly explored his own judgement of others. This took place after the chaplain had already established a therapeutic relationship with the service members, with the chaplain stating, “They know that I am not going to judge them for what they’ve done. I am going to judge them for what they will do and what they are doing now.” This demonstrated that the use of non-judgement was only retroactive, that no one would be condemned for previous actions, but that there still existed a moral standard which the chaplains adhered to and utilized moving forward. Although only one chaplain used the language of judgement for the present, this understanding that the chaplains still held a specific moral framework and held others accountable to it can be seen in the discussions of chaplains not being willing to physically leave the proximity of service members who stated they were considering committing violent crimes. In the same theme, this chaplain stated,

I knew soldiers who said, “Hey, I want to kill that commander, I want to kill that sergeant major.” By regulation I am not allowed to disclose to anyone what these soldiers said, but I try to meet with them, walk with them. Wherever they go I go with them. When they have that intention to kill other people, I still try to be with them and help them... I am here to help them see what is right and what is wrong.

This physical proximity was offered as a way to uphold both military regulations regarding the absolute confidentiality of the chaplain relationship while also allowing the chaplain to maintain his own moral standard and not allow harm to occur through

inaction. This demonstrated that when the chaplain's opinion was requested, and sometimes when it was not, there was a willingness among the chaplains to utilize pastoral authority and compassion in addressing harm and advocating for a serious consideration of the moral structures outlined in the First Precept as understood through compassion and relationship.

### **Compassion, Mindfulness, and Weapons Training**

With this relational viewpoint it is now possible to reexamine the discussion on using mindfulness techniques to assist service members in weapons qualifications. While a literal interpretation of the First Precept would allow a complete rejection of the service members in their struggles to qualify with their firearms, the relational viewpoint would ask what the ultimate impact would be of both the weapons training and the chaplain's own choice to either help or not. Faced with maintaining relationship and not taking actions which would harm the trust and willingness of the service members to come to the chaplains when faced with the challenges in their lives, some chaplains chose to assist their service members on the firing range. As explored in *Theme 3: Carrying Arms*, one chaplain stated,

I go with them to the weapons qualifications even though I don't touch the weapon at all... But then I told them if you concentrate and be mindful with every thought or every action, then you'll qualify. Control your breath. Breathe in, breathe out, and follow the instructions of your sergeant. It is easy. It was so easy because I did that, but I did not have the thought that the soldier is going to qualify to kill people, because they have to qualify to be soldiers. To get promoted they have to be qualified with weapons. That is their job, and my job is to help them, because if they are not qualified they cannot do anything.

In this situation, the chaplain addressed several forms of harm. To not act in assisting their service members would harm their future careers, and subsequently harm their financial and familial stability, with more immediate impacts on their mental and emotional health. To not act would also harm the service members' integration and acceptance within their own unit. This integration and acceptance could translate into direct physical harm towards the service member given the presence of military hazing and bullying, especially towards those individuals who are seen as inadequate or unskilled.<sup>201</sup> To not act may also lead to greater emotional and mental harm from the pressures leveled on the service members by their leadership if they could not pass their qualifications. As quoted in the previous section on compassion and non-judgment, direct pressure from the command could often be of such magnitude that some service members contemplated direct personal violence towards their immediate leadership, which is again harm that could be averted due to the chaplain choosing to act in helping their service members pass weapons qualifications.

Finally, it is worth noting, as many of the chaplains did, that qualification in weapons does not translate into combat for a vast majority of service members.

Continuing in this theme, another chaplain stated,

Many people don't even touch a gun. They only touch one because they have to go for a weapon qualification twice a year, that's it...perhaps less than 10% work on the frontline, on the battlefield, in the warzone. Even if they're there, they might not see combat or kill people.

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<sup>201</sup> This remains real and I have direct personal experience of it from both leadership and peers, though in my situation I believe that it resulted from a combination of my own effectiveness at my job coupled with the perception that my almost crippling shyness and social awkwardness was actually flagrant arrogance; Charlotte Kroger, Nynke Venema and Eva van Barrle, "Hazing in the Military: A Scoping Review," *Journal of Military, Veteran, and Family Health* 9, no. 4 (2023): 2.

There is certainly the expectation and assumption of personal physical danger and frontline combat, but this does not turn into a reality for most military members.<sup>202</sup>

Given this reality the choice becomes even clearer for most chaplains – assist in what is primarily a mechanical practice or choose to abandon their service members to greater forms of mental and emotional harm which, as the chaplains directly related, could sometimes transform into physical violence itself.

All of the justifications create an easily accepted path to follow of upholding both Buddhist teachings and troop support at the same time. It should be mentioned, however, that even assuming the above situation, none of the chaplains interviewed explored the potential of a different and equally plausible outcome to their choice in supporting weapons training. The techniques for weapons training could just as easily be utilized by individuals seeking to better kill others with the intention to kill others. None of the chaplains who advocated for mindfulness techniques in weapons training discussed the potential of their training helping some soldiers intentionally carry out violence towards either other soldiers or civilians. The above quotes presented the potential of soldiers not using the techniques to assist in intentional killing as a foregone conclusion due to limited formal combat exposure. This might be seen as tangential evidence of the potential presence of spiritual bypass as discussed at the conclusion of the first viewpoint. Overall,

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<sup>202</sup> Surprisingly, though understandably, in my work as a civilian chaplain at VA Loma Linda Medical Center, considerable respect and deference is given to those who have been in combat, while appreciable levels of stigma and shame can appear for those who were not. I usually notice certain veterans trying to refer to experiences in such a way as to imply combat duty where none took place, and I have found that other veterans have completely fabricated their entire combat experiences. This happens for both social clout and for disability payments. In my experience, those who saw combat speak about it far less than those who have not.

this demonstrated one area in which further consideration and elucidation by all chaplains may be necessary to encourage greater introspection and avoid the trap of easy answers.

Ultimately, this question of weapons training appeared to come down to each chaplain's own personal understanding of the First Precept. Some of those interviewed were explicit in rejecting the use of mindfulness training to assist service members in weapons qualifications, stating,

I would suggest to any Buddhist chaplain, especially when they lead meditation, do not teach soldiers how to be better at shooting. Only use mindfulness meditation techniques to help. If it's how to focus and shoot, no, it is a no go according to the precepts.

The communal discussion from the chaplains regarding weapons use demonstrated an individualistic ability to discern a correct course of action, which itself is in keeping with Buddhist teachings. In the *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha explicitly states that people should not base their decisions off of tradition, scriptures, anecdotes, or anything else, but rather on their own inquiry and discernment into what is right and will decrease suffering.<sup>203</sup> This exhortation is repeated in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* when the Buddha states that monastics must be islands unto themselves, taking no refuge in anything except for the teachings.<sup>204</sup> While it is true that the First Precept is certainly part of the teachings, the chaplains showed an understanding that it is not the entirety of the teachings, and so other factors must be considered. The above scriptures seem to indicate that the Buddha is comfortable in offering this type of leeway to allow for unique contexts to be examined and incorporated into decision making. Therefore in situations such as weapons training,

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<sup>203</sup> Sujato, "Kesamutta Sutra (AN 3.65)," Sutta Central, accessed August 26, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/an3.65/en/sujato>.

<sup>204</sup> Sujato, "Mahaparinibbana Sutta (DN 16)."

the chaplains are encouraged to use their own discernment, including an understanding of all the different facets of their specific situation – who is asking for training, what are the primary duties of the service member, what challenges is this service member facing, what will be the impact of not passing this qualification, what happened last time they did or did not help, etc. Sometimes the conclusion will be to refuse to offer advice on the use of weapons, which for some chaplains is a guiding sentiment. At other times, the choice will be to help service members pass their qualifications. Even understanding that these soldiers will enter into combat, other chaplains expressed that the teachings might help the service members calm the fires of anger which may lead to even greater suffering and loss of life than might otherwise occur without the chaplain's intervention. In *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship*, one chaplain stated,

However, if you stay in this is an organization, I recommend that you be professional when you kill. All this training is basically applied to this principle. So, train yourself, train yourself not to kill with anger or hatred.

Ultimately, a single moral pronouncement cannot be given. The considerations in the training of weapons will be discussed further when exploring the absolute, where it will be seen again that the precepts, including the First Precept, are not a static declaration on binary indictments for behavior.

### **Compassion, Personal Isolation, and Chaplain Community**

The final area to explore before turning to a discussion of the absolute is how relationship and more importantly compassion relates to oneself. While this topic was perhaps the least explored, discussions on the chaplains' relationships with each other as military chaplains and to their home communities all pointed to a relational aspect of the

First Precept, namely, as one chaplain put it in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*, “The First Precept the Buddha talks about is refraining from killing or harming other people, and that includes the self too.” The biggest undercurrent which these discussions pointed to was that of isolation. Some of the chaplains spoke about the burdens of holding the suffering of those around them without a community which understands their situation, stating,

Because sometimes their congregations say that you should not join the Army. It might be something that they do not want to discuss, or they think that this is something I should keep to myself. But my understanding is that if you don't talk about this then you'll get into trouble.

Reflecting on the specifically spiritual, rather than psychological, aspects of Buddhist tradition, one of the chaplains in the same theme lamented on not having a military Buddhist chaplain community which could engage in rituals of purification and repentance in response to holding the suffering of other military service members and the burdens of military service in general. This conversation took place within the context of the burdens that come usually with violent action, be it institutional or criminal, and all pointed to a certain level of vicarious impact on chaplains who must bear witness to the pain of others. Without the relationship that community brings and the compassion of those who have themselves experienced the same situation as the chaplain, i.e. other chaplains, the chaplains find themselves carrying the burden of their own suffering alone.

In some instances, this isolation extended to a separation of the chaplain from Buddhist tradition writ large. In *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*, one chaplain specifically spoke about this, noting how despite commissioning as a Buddhist chaplain to represent Buddhism and its teaching in the military, incongruent

overarching command priorities mostly reduced his role as a chaplain from a religious figure engaged in spiritual support to a secular psychological and behavioral health adjunct.

Most units kind of use their chaplains as either the morale officer, which under Army regulations we cannot be the morale officer, and this is much much much much much more common, they see us as behavioral health adjuncts, as like an extra set of hands for the behavioral health world, which is also not our job, but that's what commanders want, so that's what commanders get.

Returning to *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*, another chaplain voiced a desire for more formal forms of support and connection between chaplains, likely because they are the only ones with direct experience of military service and so can speak more effectively to chaplain needs than those who have not worn the uniform.

While it is possible to argue that such community is currently not possible due to the low census of Buddhist chaplains in the military, this isolation appeared to reach to the chaplain's relationship with their home community as well, cutting off what might otherwise be a different source of understanding and support. As explored above in *The Home Community and Monastic Status*, many of the chaplains reflected on either the indirect or direct resistance they received from their home communities for choosing to join the military. The chaplains started this discussion by drawing explicitly clear lines about not judging others or making decisions for them about joining or extending their contracts with the military. At the same time, every chaplain that discussed family in *Theme 7: Chaplain Advice for Civilians*, stated that if a family member wanted to join the military, the chaplain "would suggest not." Hopefully, this mirrored in reverse the chaplain's relationship with their parent tradition where their community sometimes had trouble accepting the chaplain's decision to commission, but ultimately did not dictate to

the monastic whether or not they could join.<sup>205</sup> Some home communities worked to change their relationship to one of support for the military chaplain, with some already fully familiar with military chaplaincy as explored in *Theme A: Who are the Chaplains?*,

They are supportive. I know that back home several monks in my tradition also served in the army as chaplains. So, my root temple is familiar with the concept of a chaplain. When I came back and told them I am a chaplain, they were OK with that.

As discussed previously, this ideal dynamic did not always take place. While many chaplains later spoke about working to resolve the concerns their home communities had about military service, the comments implied that this was more akin to an uneasy truce rather than a close and uplifting relationship which might help the chaplains process their own burdens. This was as reflected by a chaplain in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*.<sup>206</sup>

My home temple was originally very much on board because this was a population of human beings who were being ignored. We felt that it was important for us to go in and not ignore them. Since then, I've had an opportunity to speak with a couple of the senior clergy and they are a little hesitant, if I am completely honest. They are a little bit hesitant until they learn what I am doing and how I am impacting people.

In the face of these pressures, none of the chaplains interviewed outlined a systematic process of selfcare despite mentioning the pressures of carrying such burdens

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<sup>205</sup> Of course, this research cannot determine how many monastics may have been dissuaded from commissioning as military chaplain due to the same concerns brought up by those interviewed.

<sup>206</sup> My own direct spiritual teacher has reflected to me on numerous occasions that the biggest danger for anyone in the priesthood is isolation. While still seeking military chaplaincy, he stated that the concern voiced by the Bishop of our tradition was not about the military, but that it involved me operating in isolation from other priests. Without a spiritual community, i.e., a Sangha, to offer grounding and perspective it becomes incredibly easy for someone to become spiritually unbalanced.

and the vicarious trauma of encountering suffering on a daily basis.<sup>207</sup> Recounting the chaplain mentioned above who voiced a desire for ritualistic support, this participant stated,

I wish I could help put those rituals together for those who are currently serving. I know that I could certainly use it. The whole concept of doing something ritualistic in nature as a symbolic way of addressing my own failures in that arena, those tend to help more than certain other things or other avenues that I could take.

All of the comments pointed to the mutual problem of support. The chaplains appeared to lack a strong framework of support between themselves as military members, and their home communities appeared to lack sufficient education or an understanding from direct experience within the military to properly support the chaplains in their work.

As noted in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, chaplains of Asian descent may be bearing a greater amount of mental health stress than might be assumed on surface-level encounters. The limited self-reporting of mental health challenges, coupled with the rates of increase in suicidal ideation despite the levels of discouragement in reporting due to mental health stigma noted in some Asian communities, may all contribute to greater levels of self-harm than is readily apparent from these interviews. This may indicate the need for even greater support from either home communities or within the Chaplain Corps itself for these chaplains as they face the burdens of their service, as well as from formal professional mental health specialists trained in PTSD and moral injury modalities. It may be interesting to see how and if these chaplains work to create such

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<sup>207</sup> It should be noted that selfcare was not a specific research question and these chaplains may have clear and specific methods of addressing this which were not discussed during interviews due to the focus on ethics.

community resources for themselves and for future military chaplains from the outside in the years after they have separated from military service.

Even if one's view is limited to the individual chaplain, the choice to join the military is already associated with harm of the self, stemming from the challenges common to all service members, including social isolation, discipline, physical isolation, and the additional chaplain-specific burden of holding the suffering of others and attempting to walk with them in their pain. The First Precept may not necessarily point to this type of harm and state that due to it one should not become a chaplain, rather it shows chaplains need to be aware that such burdens are possible, even likely, and that to uphold the First Precept through a relational and compassionate viewpoint towards the self would require a level of intentional selfcare and community integration which many of the chaplains interviewed did not appear to have.

### **Conclusion**

The relational and compassionate viewpoint of the *trivabhava* allows chaplains access to those who might otherwise remain unserved. This access extends throughout the military structure, from the command team to the individual enlisted members. Through non-judgement and a willingness to be with others, even in situations which a literal understanding of the First Precept might call into question, these chaplains are able to engage several aspects of harm which service members suffer. This non-judgement created space which allowed relationships to be established and compassion to inform direct interventions. Addressing this suffering extended not only to the physical, but to the emotional, mental, and spiritual as well. By engaging in the proactive support of

others, the relational and compassionate view of the *trivabhava* was able to rectify the shortcomings of a purely literal interpretation of the First Precept. The compassionate viewpoint allowed the chaplains to engage with all those around them, while shining a light on their own burdens. With this consideration of the relational and compassionate viewpoint of the *trivabhava* as it applies to the First Precept, it is now possible to look at the final viewpoint, that of the absolute.

### **Absolute Understandings of the First Precept**

Speaking doctrinally, within the realm of the absolute there is no separation between self and others and there is a complete understanding of both the interconnection and emptiness of all phenomena.<sup>208</sup> To touch the absolute on a personal level is an act of enlightenment where all fetters are shaken off and complete understanding occurs. When discussing the absolute in terms of the moral choices of chaplains, this is not what the absolute means. Instead, an absolute view of the precepts is to ask how one can uphold the First Precept in an interconnected world. The absolute view asks how the First Precept can be sincerely upheld when any action, when traced far enough, is always based on the killing of living beings or the profiting off the harm of others. The absolute asks how to act when there is no sure way to know the ultimate impact of any one choice, when even the most mundane of actions can potentially lead to the death of some or the suffering of others. In an attempt to respond to this question, this final section will first look at the realities of violence and military structures in this world. This will be

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<sup>208</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Heart of Buddha's Teaching*, 226.

followed by a discussion of the role of karma and intention, together with how they inform a perception of guardianship. Finally, an absolute viewpoint must ask the more fundamental question of whether holding or breaking a precept is even the proper question to even ask.

### **Real World Violence**

The first potential step in responding to this question is a clear-eyed understanding of the real world. Holding this truth was something which most of the chaplains brought up at some point in the interviews. War and institutional violence are real occurrences throughout the world. They have been happening throughout history and there is no evidence that they will cease at any point in the future. One of the chaplains brought up that even the Buddha himself was unable to stop military violence despite multiple attempts, stating in *Theme 2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm*, “In the precepts there are several stories like this and that helped me understand that the Buddha tried to stop war a couple of times, but they were still fighting.”<sup>209</sup> To believe that modern chaplains have more ability than the Buddha to sway such an entrenched aspect of the human condition appears somewhat inappropriate.

An immediate response to this is to advocate simply not joining the military, as several chaplains did when asked what their advice to their family members would be in *Theme 7: Chaplain Advice for Civilians*. This, however, is to take refuge in believing that simply by not being an active duty member of the military means any individual

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<sup>209</sup> Likely referring to the Buddha’s four attempts to stop the destruction of the Shakya clan by King Vitatubha. Mingun, *Great Chronicles*, 1362-1363.

within American society does not hold responsibility for the actions taken by the military. All things are interconnected and military actions are based off political decisions formed by civilian governments, voted into power by individuals. These political entities then craft policy and direct military efforts based off the priorities of society and citizenry, ranging from individual demands to have cheap gasoline, to disposable electronics, to the insistence that stock prices only ever rise. The overarching reach of greed in all humans was noted by one chaplain in this same theme as a reason that societies have, and will continue to have, armed conflict.

This is kind of human nature...the Three Poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance. This is true for all homo sapiens, from the time we used sticks and rocks to kill each other, to now when we use weapons to kill each other. For food, for territory or resources, even water. If they want to occupy that, then they use a stick to kill each other, or a stone. So, this is kind of coded in our human DNA, to attack.

In the modern era, all of these priorities are backed at some point by the American military, which itself received direction politically. The above chaplain appears to understand that believing anyone is free from the responsibility of military violence in society is to be unaware of how individual choices and actions, political and economic, are connected to the priorities of the government and hence the military. Despite these comments about human nature, it is not appropriate to simply dismiss institutional violence by stating that it is unavoidable and therefore there is no individual obligation to act in resolving suffering when it is within reach. As one chaplain stating in *Theme 8: Killing May Be Permissible*,

So in some very limited circumstances, and we have to be very careful and very mindful of these circumstances, and we have to reflect very carefully on these circumstances before doing them, while we're doing them, and after we're doing them, as the Buddha gave his advice to Rahula, we have to consider that if these are the only options that we have, and one of them is going to lead to a lot of

people suffering, and we can prevent that by making one person suffer, to the point where they die, usually as quickly as humanely possible, since we don't want to make them suffer any longer than they have to, we don't want to make them suffer any more than we want to make anyone else suffer because of what they're going to do, if we can minimize that suffering in any way, even if that is a bad option, if that is the least bad option of all the bad options, then that is the one we have to take.

Many of the chaplains appeared to demonstrate an ability to recognize two types of perspective within an absolute viewpoint, that violence is unavoidable and that work must still be performed to address it.<sup>210</sup> On the one hand, violence is unavoidable at this point in history, and so by upholding compassion and non-judgement as outlined in *Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing*, the chaplains refuse to reject the service members who are suffering and work to address their burdens as just as equally worthy of receiving support as any other human beings. At the same time, in *Theme 7: Chaplain Advice for Civilians*, the chaplains demonstrate the understanding that military service is not necessarily the best vocation for someone seeking to validate the full autonomy and value of being human. This can be seen through the numerous comments made by the chaplains that they would not advise their family members or friends to join the military if there were other opportunities. In this dynamic, both relational and literal understandings of the First Precept are upheld together in an absolute understanding. As mentioned in the relational section above, there could easily be other considerations which the chaplains need to balance when asked about their own level of support for the military, decisions which could impact their relationships and access to other service members and their integration into their command.

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<sup>210</sup> Scripturally, this understanding appears to echo the Bodhisattva Vow in the Mahayana tradition which states that "Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them." Sotoshu Shumicho, "Four Vows," 74.

### **Karma, Intention, and Guardianship**

The next overall point of discussion which highlighted this absolute viewpoint focused on karma and intention. All things are interconnected, and so any action taken in one place will have an impact everywhere else. The ability of a single action in one place to effect all other things, regardless of how many steps removed, was the first truth understood by the Buddha in the very moment of his enlightenment.<sup>211</sup>

When the First Precept is no longer seen only in a literal perspective, the ongoing process of relationship, feedback, and impact from one's decisions can be better understood through the perspective of karma rather than from arbitrary rules. Many of the chaplains spoke about karma. Their comments ranged from how they arrived at their current positions in the military as explored in *Home Community and Monastic Status* above to how they conceive and understand the burdens of those they're serving. The chaplains also spoke about how to make positive choices which reduce harm when addressing trauma, as explored in *Compassion and Non-Judgment* above. Karma, meaning consequence, appears on the surface to be a rather unassuming and unremarkable teaching. Colloquially, karma is usually used in terms of explaining the causes of current events – asking what was done in the past that led to this particular present. Despite being logical – if actions have consequences then consequences can be traced to previous actions – using karma as an explanation for a current situation is surprising because the Buddha was explicit in stating that the teaching of karma is never

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<sup>211</sup> “I together with the great earth and sentient beings simultaneously attain the way.” *Record of the Transmission of Illumination by the Great Ancestor, Zen Master Keizan*, ed. T. Griffith Foulk (Tokyo: Shotochu Shumicho, 2017), 2.

to be used to try and explain how a current situation came about.<sup>212</sup> Instead, it should be used for liberation, by showing that one is never trapped in the present situation and everyone always has the ability to make choices now which will lead to a better future.

In *Theme 5: Service Member's Burden of Killing*, one chaplain stated,

When people already killed, first you need to forgive yourself and let it go. Understand that the karma is already done, but the most important thing is that new karma can be created which will help with healing and coping.

This chaplain appears to understand that karma should not be used to explore the past, because the number of causes and conditions stemming from both ourselves and others which need to intersect to create the current situation are usually so complicated and manifold that it would be impossible to point to any single factor as the one true cause. Despite this, human beings have the tendency to use a retroactive exploration of karma as a way to excuse disenfranchising others and legitimizing inaction or exploitation. This shadow side of karma has been used in Buddhist societies in both the past and the present to legitimize inaction when addressing the plight of others.<sup>213</sup>

Many of the chaplains interviewed did not fall into this trap and utilized a more appropriate understanding of karma to ask what can be done now to make the future better. These choices would have a direct impact on the First Precept as the service

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<sup>212</sup> Sujato, "Unthinkable (AN 4.77)," Sutta Central, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://suttacentral.net/an4.77/en/sujato>.

<sup>213</sup> Victoria, "Karma, War and Inequality," 4; Noah Kurzenhauser, "The Culpability of Religion – Reviewing the Impact of Theravada Buddhism on Thai Sex Trafficking and Prostitution," Garnet Global Affairs and Religion Network, March 4, 2022, <https://garnet.elliott.gwu.edu/2022/03/04/march-04-2022-the-culpability-of-religion-reviewing-the-impact-of-theravada-buddhism-on-thai-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-noah-kurzenhauser-ma-security-policy/>.

member would be in a position to better direct their actions towards less harmful decisions. This was explored by a chaplain in *Theme 8: Killing May Be Permissible*.

You sacrifice for your county. You know exactly what you will have to do, what you will have to face. You will have bad karma. If you have no intention to kill people, you just have the intention to protect them, this might reduce your bad karma.

Here, the chaplain points out that the mechanism through which these choices would be modified is intention. Intention was highlighted as the lynchpin in the manifold conditions which combine to form an event, especially as it provides the pivot in leading to the amount and type of negative consequences or karma that results from breaking the precepts, such as in killing. Citing the *Pratimoksha*, one chaplain in *Theme 1: What is the First Precept?* outlined how killing without intention would disrupt the line of causation and reduce the negative karma associated with such actions.<sup>214</sup>

They have qualifications in order for you to break the rules about killing in Buddhism. The first is that you need to be aware that the animal or the being you are going to kill is alive. Second you must have the intention to kill them. Third is you try to kill them. The fourth is you perform the action of killing, and the fifth one is the animal or person dies because of your action. These all must be completed in order for you to break the First Precept. If you have no intention, then basically your First Precept is not completely broken. It's not good, it's like it's damaged.

Several other chaplains echoed this understanding without specific scriptural citation. Despite the implication of this statement, all chaplains were explicit in stating that negative karma or consequences would still come about through the act of killing, stating only that such karma might be mitigated through controlling one's intention as outlined in *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship*. The primary goal, in terms of the First

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<sup>214</sup> Thanissaro, *Buddhist Monastic Code*, 29.

Precept, was to help service members shift from killing with anger or joy to a self-conception of being a protector who might need to enact violence out of necessity. By conceiving of themselves as guardians or protectors, this would help guide the intention used to enact violence towards a less destructive end, even if human lives were still lost.

As one chaplain stated in this theme,

I don't see you as a killer, so you still have the precept of no killing. If you have the intention to kill other people then you break your precept and so you are not a good Buddhist, but you are a guardian and that is different.

Not only would the immediate impact of violence be lessened, with fewer lives lost and fewer deadly mistakes made, but the lasting impact of violence in terms of moral injury, shame, and other mental, emotional, and spiritual traumas could be mitigated as well, all due to the direct interventions of military chaplains. Given the emphasis placed on the role of intention, it was surprising that only one chaplain mentioned the story of the ship captain from the *Upaya Kausalaya Sutra* in *Theme 8: Killing May Be Permissible*, as this would seem to be one of the clearest and most direct affirmations of killing available within the pan-Buddhist tradition. In this sutra, the Buddha in a previous life intentionally kills one person to save others.<sup>215</sup> This story is not found in the Theravada canon despite being presented as a Jataka tale, and appears to be a later Mahayana invention as discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*. This teaching has, however, been encountered and cited in academic literature in discussions of Buddhist violence. Despite this, the teaching was only mentioned once even though several chaplains from Mahayana traditions were interviewed. Instead, most of the chaplains

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<sup>215</sup> Tatz, *The Skills in Means Sutra*, 73-74.

seemed to frame the limit of changing intention to a minimization of harm rather than a condolence of it. One chaplain, however, viewed intention as such a powerful tool that it had the potential to serve as a mechanism of transcendent awakening in the heat of battle.

If you don't have anger, you can kill. If you do have anger, you violate your First Precept intentionally. You support an organization that uses propaganda to support you to kill, but we are here basically to minimize suffering. I always keep this in mind, to bring with my presence humanity, joyfulness, and equanimity. These are the qualities, so we have a saying, "Drop your cleaver and become a Buddha." When you put down your weapon and you realize that what you have been doing is wrong and you reflect on the qualities of enlightenment, then you can become enlightened.

This comment upholds and extends the already discussed viewpoint that the chaplains never viewed the suffering of their service members as beyond reach. At the same time, this demonstrates another example of the need to balance different viewpoints. By acknowledging that enlightenment can occur in the moment of killing, the door has been opened to then claim that war and fighting can therefore be a full and legitimate path of Buddhist practice itself, even to the point of purposefully seeking battle to achieve this goal.<sup>216</sup> The chaplains interviewed appeared to be aware of this and actively worked to counteract such a viewpoint through their discussions on intention and guardianship. During the discussions, however, there seemed to be limited understanding or acknowledgement that these very same arguments for the minimization of harm, the protection of the state and others, and the ability to find liberation on the battlefield are all arguments which have proactively been used to legitimize unilateral violence and unprovoked military aggression by Buddhist societies in the past, as outlined in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*.

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<sup>216</sup> Victoria, *Zen at War*, 126.

The potentially problematic use of Buddhist doctrine to support unnecessary military action appeared to dovetail with another shadow-side of the role of intention and personal karma. Many of the chaplain comments about karma and intention focused exclusively on the personal choices of the service member or on a literal understanding of the service member's personal actions. For example, in *Theme 6: Chaplain Responsibility for Killing*, one participant stated,

The bottom line is when you start working as a chaplain, we don't interfere with their own karma. They have their own interpretations for living, but we are not supposed to kill, so I'm not killing. I'm not helping them to kill anybody. What I help with is to help them have resiliency, to not have mental disruptions for themselves, to let them be clear about their own path, and to help them have their own path. That is what spiritual readiness is all about.

Another chaplain echoed this sentiment in *Theme 8: Killing May Be Permissible*, stating, "You already agreed to be in the military. You must have responsibility for your own actions. You have your own karma."

The chaplains noted that they cannot make decisions for others, and in the exploration on weapons use, the chaplains discussed how most military personnel never serve as frontline troops. These conversations all seemed to point to some disconnect in the chaplains' awareness of how non-combat jobs directly facilitated violence and exist primarily to allow violence to occur, the chaplain's job included. Guns cannot fire if someone isn't there to supply them to the riflemen, and guided missiles cannot strike if someone does not pilot the ship or drive the battery within range. Soldiers cannot fight if someone isn't dedicated to providing them food, or, in the chaplain's case, providing them with the "resilience" to return to duty. The fact that Buddhist tradition, through its teachings on Right Livelihood and the centuries old discussions about whether this

includes the selling of arms, show that Buddhist tradition understands how different causes and conditions can still related to and impact each other, even if these connections are more than one step removed from each other.<sup>217</sup> The modern chaplains all appeared well-versed in their religious traditions, and the concept of interconnection is not a fringe belief in most Buddhist sects. This makes the attempts by modern chaplains to distance themselves from military violence by claiming that they and most other military members do not directly kill, despite still being part of the military, all the more remarkable. The discussion and mechanism of spiritual bypass as explored in the discussion of literal understandings of the First Precept appear here again. Throughout the interviews there was only one participant who made explicit acknowledgement for how his direct actions assist in the death of others. As stated in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*,

Does that always work? No. Am I liable for that? Yes, and I understand that I bear some weight of that burden, and I can accept it. I fully accept the responsibility that sometimes I will fail too. Maybe I'm not legally liable, but I am morally liable when I can't convince them to be better.

At the same time, it should be noted that this conclusion may also be impacted by cross-cultural communication proficiency. A chaplain of Asian descent was quoted speaking about his decision to join the military in *Home Community and Monastic Status* above, stating that the decision and consequences of his choice were his and his alone. The way in which this was said could be interpreted to imply just such an acknowledgement of the support of violence despite not being communicated in a more traditional form of Western expression. Ultimately, there is room for both conclusions to be true, that how researchers interpret qualitative data is not always accurate and that

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<sup>217</sup> Heng-Ching, *Sutra on Upasaka Precepts*, 76.

some of the interviewed chaplains are struggling with some form of spiritual bypass when it comes to the impact of their actions.

### **Responsibility and Spiritual Bypass**

This chapter has mentioned both responsibility and spiritual bypass several times, both in how chaplains share responsibility for military violence, and how spiritual bypass may be at play locally when it comes to weapons use or generally in discussions of responsibility overall. The absolute allows for multiple truths to be present at the same time. As the context of these truths are subsumed in the broader absolute viewpoint new considerations come to light. Discussions of responsibility often assume that individuals are stronger than the social currents which surround them or that people are immune from the impact of larger systemic processes. This is not always the case, and sometimes those very structures which advertise themselves as safety nets for individuals are actually used to ensnare them. For example, as discussed above in the compassionate viewpoint on *Navigating Interfaith Relationships*, freedom of religion as an overarching context was noted by the chaplains as not actually being used to protect the rights of each individual. Rather, it was used by those in power to silence minority religious viewpoints through legitimizing proselytization while simultaneously being presented as proof that such silencing was not taking place. This type of silencing by those with power was noted within Buddhist tradition as well. In the discussion above on *Karma, Intention and Guardianship*, karma was shown to have been historically weaponized to place individual blame on those who bear the brunt of larger economic and social disenfranchisement. In the face of these larger trends, it is necessary to be careful not to use the concept of

individual responsibility as a crutch to perpetuate ongoing systems of oppression and to take a closer look at how much autonomy individuals actually have. The discussion in *Navigating Command Relationships* and *Daily Functions: Advise, Serve, and Facilitate*, both noted how chaplains may have felt compelled to compromise their own internal values in order to be accepted within larger command structures. In *Compassion, Mindfulness, and Weapons Training* it was noted explicitly how the larger military apparatus directly overrode some of the chaplain's deepest held ethical beliefs about using weapons. In the face of such dynamics it is hard to genuinely claim that these chaplains as individuals had full freedom of choice in their situations. As discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, the only recourse for officers who morally disagree with any lawful order is to resign their commission. It is hard to view this as a truly free choice as this means losing the chaplain's career, income, family stability, medical benefits, and a whole host of other cascading effects, the consideration of which can very easily silence the officers who may hold legitimate moral concerns about the military's choice of action. In these situations it is difficult to claim that the chaplains always have the power to make their own choices. In *Theme D: Daily Activities and Command Relationship*, one chaplain, upon hearing a command's plan for violence, stated, "We better keep silent, quiet, be a mindful presence." Rather than claiming that not taking a verbose moral stand is a moral deficiency within the chaplains themselves, it may be helpful viewing such examples as a testament to the power and effectiveness of the larger systems the chaplains find themselves in.

Absolute views still require balance, and so it should be noted that chaplaincy as a vocation within the military still allows room for the consideration of personal

responsibility despite the overriding power of surrounding social systems. In order for military chaplaincy to be feasible, a dedicated and long-term trajectory of determination within the civilian sphere is needed. Graduate education, years of work experience, and ordination and endorsement requirements all require an individual to desire and consistently work towards these standards. This is further impacted by many of the chaplains stating in *The Home Community and Monastic Status* that their communities were hesitant about military service, with the chaplains likely being able to, and even encouraged, to remain in socially respected positions as religious leaders within their home communities. Given these requirements and the effort needed to meet them, above and beyond what is required for enlisted military service members, it is equally disingenuous to state that these chaplains have arrived at their current positions due to social and systemic forces beyond their control or intention.

It therefore becomes necessary to hold both understandings – that larger systems do impact individuals in both positive and negative ways, while at the same time personal choices do matter and individuals are responsible for them. As discussed above, command relationships and weapons use appear to be areas where larger systemic forces may be interpreted as overriding the autonomy of the chaplains, while understandings of karma and interconnection appear to form areas where the chaplain's personal viewpoints have a greater impact on their understanding. When these dynamics are further influenced by the methodology and positioning of this research, such as the just-mentioned cross-cultural communication, the need to be both careful and introspective with the human subjects of this study is highlighted. Future research focused on the role and impact of chaplains based on their ethnic and cultural rather than religious

backgrounds may be an engaging area of continued study, especially when looking at the overall impact of larger, and oftentimes troubling, social systems.

In facing this nuanced understanding of responsibility, spiritual bypass again comes into consideration. Spiritual bypass is often presented in a pejorative light, and understandably so – it is the act of using scriptural or doctrinal authority to legitimize problematic actions. Using Buddhist mindfulness techniques to train troops in weapons use is the primary example that has been mentioned in this research of potential spiritual bypass. Again, within absolute viewpoints, multiple, sometimes assumedly contradictory viewpoints are able to be held in tandem. Spiritual bypass can be problematic while also serving as a stopgap response to distress. Coupled with the above discussion on personal responsibility, an individual who feels cornered in a situation where their internal values come into conflict with their required duties or surrounding social pressure, could make use of spiritual bypass as a way to endure the situation in the short-term. This would allow distress to be deflected rather than generating more conflict through directly challenging an overarching, and often much more powerful, system that an individual is operating under. The potential results of using spiritual bypass in this way have already been mentioned by the chaplains in *Theme 5. Service Member's Burden of Killing*.

I look at the modern definition of moral injury, the contraction between core values and actions, and now try to use the term moral injury to explain the whole incidence.

Spiritual bypass can be seen as one of the mechanisms which, depending on severity, may lead to moral injury, now within the chaplains themselves. Spiritual bypass cannot be assumed to be a permanent solution, while still containing some uses which are not often recognized. For chaplains, the multiple instances of potential spiritual bypass

mentioned above in *Mindfulness and Weapons Training* and *Navigating Command Relationships*, may demonstrate an immediate defensive response or coping strategy to a hostile situation. For the individual and, as noted in *Compassion, Personal Isolation, and Chaplain Community*, often isolated chaplains, it is somewhat disingenuous to believe that they alone would be able to effectively face down an entire military command with centuries of experience in coercing others without social or professional repercussions. For weapons training discussed in *Theme 3: Carrying Weapons*, similar types of pressures leveled at enlisted members who are unable to meet qualification standards could be targeted at chaplains themselves by their own leaders for not using every tool available to support mandated troop resiliency. In these situations where larger and more powerful systemic forces move against the chaplains, spiritual bypass may be the only thing available in the moment that can be used to maintain internal psychological integrity. Spiritual bypass can very easily lead to harm of self and others, but this may not be the whole story. The irony of the absolute viewpoint is that it breaks down absolutist understandings. Traditional notions of personal responsibility being admirable and spiritual bypass being the action of the morally deficient cease to be unassailable positions when the wider context, causes, and conditions begin to be taken into consideration. Such consideration is uncomfortable as it breaks down the internal security of a black and white world. A more nuanced exploration of the varied uses of spiritual bypass in military chaplains and as an overall phenomenon, especially as a defense mechanism or coping strategy amidst larger cultural systems, as well as the prevalence and responses to moral injury within chaplains, could be worthwhile areas of future research.

### **Precept Practice, Discernment, and Balance**

All of these interactions, from accepting the real world, minimizing harm, changing intention and karma, and the use of non-judgement, can be understood from a relational and compassionate viewpoint or a literal viewpoint following the thought progressions outlined in each major section above. Just as the absolute view involves being able to balance different viewpoints, one use of the Three Views is to balance them all together as a whole. As this shifting perspective of how to understand and balance the Three Views continues to unfold, the efficacy of the First Precept and how to utilize it is slowly uncovered.

As one of the chaplains noted in *Theme 4: Intention and Guardianship*, the First Precept is for actions that are already happening, not for actions which do not exist.

So then they say I'm being trained to engage the enemy, to kill the enemy, so am I still a Buddhist? I say yes, you are still Buddhist – you already took the precept, no killing. And that precept is for a killer. If you kill with intention, you are no longer a Buddhist, but you are not a killer, you are a soldier. I see a soldier as different from a killer. I see the soldier, the US Army soldier as the protector, the guardian, so you are not a killer. You don't just get a weapon and kill people. You protect them, you guard them, you help them.

If killing, stealing, or lying were issues which had already been resolved, there would be no need of the precepts to begin with. This is not a legitimization of or permission for killing, but rather that the presence of the First Precept does not preclude killing from happening, as indicated by the chaplain comments quoted above about the importance of intention. Instead, it provides the starting point for spiritual cultivation as evidenced by the chaplains work in transforming past trauma into present meaning.

The First Precept, although presented in absolute language, is not static or monolithic. Instead, it functions as a gauge to measure one's own actions as seen through

any and all viewpoints presented in the *trivabhava* in order to consider whether one's choices are leading towards one's own suffering or the harm of others. This can especially be seen in the discussion of mindfulness techniques and weapons use – sometimes supporting weapons use might be appropriate, sometimes it is not. When truly engaged, the First Precept is an ongoing discussion between the chaplain, the service members, the command, and within the chaplain themselves. However even in the face of past mistakes, the chaplains' expressed understanding of the teaching of karma demonstrates that a positive choice can always be made here and now. When exploring violence in *Theme 2: Real World Violence and Minimizing Harm*, one chaplain stated that even mistakes can allow for one's own discernment to come into play and help inform future decisions,

Regardless of whether you're in the military or not, the soldiers are still fighting, still killing each other, still killing enemies. So my role in the military is to help soldiers be aware of themselves more, and to help them understand their relationships and the value of human life. Help soldiers understand the meaning of service, so whether they are engaged in combat or not, the message is still there.

Many of the chaplain statements were linear, as noted in the above comment about guardianship, where the violent emphasis in military service was noted, the chaplain offered an intervention by emphasizing a change in intention, and the service members now (potentially) viewed themselves as guardians rather than killers. None of the chaplains extended this understanding to explore the potential for a feedback loop of allowing an ongoing process where every action is observed and the impact of the action is determined as clearly as possible through mindfulness and contemplation. As new information about the impact of certain decisions appears, the First Precept could then

guide those experiences back into the formation of new intentions, which then creates new karmic consequences which again modify further intentions. While a single cycle of this process was expressed by the chaplains, transforming this into an ongoing process will help in two further ways. Such an interpretation would allow for both ongoing spiritual development in the service members the chaplains interact with, as well as offer a fallback position if the chaplains were ever to determine that their interventions were not effective.

Were the chaplains to view the First Precept as an ongoing feedback loop, rather than a determination on whether something breaks an arbitrary rule, when the results of a choice turn out to be unhelpful, and if someone does get harmed because of that choice, the First Precept would not expel the individual from community. Instead the chaplain could utilize the First Precept to provide a clear understanding of how and why the individual has arrived at this new place of suffering. This would enable the First Precept to serve as an active response and tool rather than only as a static beginning proposition for spiritual engagement and ethical consideration in military circles. Understanding that the discussion of the First Precept is far from over, and that the uses of the First Precept in a dynamic fashion has only begun, one of the chaplains concluded in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*,

In this situation I am really happy to see this precept of “Do not harm life” being talked about... Once you’re finished with your dissertation, I would love to read it since it is an important topic because this can be really tough, about the precepts, and how we can learn from different perspectives.

Despite declarative statements by the chaplains when asked about the First Precept directly, by taking the actions uncovered in these interviews as a whole, the First

Precept appears to ultimately be unwilling to deal in absolutes. It does not provide a specific “yes” or “no” to every situation, but neither does it allow for complete relativity. This can be seen in the chaplains themselves. They do not necessarily support all aspects of the military, but neither do they reject it, instead choosing to support service members while pushing back when the actions of the individual appears to be leaning towards the excessive, either in terms of violence or in terms of the demands placed upon the enlisted members.

Throughout this entire process, chaplains moved alongside all these situations and issues. They move alongside the First Precept itself, gauging and evaluating their own actions with each person or situation they interacted with, such as considering the impact on service members who requested assistance with weapons use. They move alongside their troops, offering support and advice to address the suffering they faced due to military service. They also move alongside their Buddhist tradition, not operating as a traditional member of their community, but neither fully removed from it. This consideration of not using either/or language is present even when not talking about killing directly, but in the overall conception of the military, when one of the chaplains stated above that the soldier was not a killer, but “my protector.” Ultimately, the First Precept is not asking what you are doing, it is asking who you are.

### **Conclusion**

The absolute view of the *trivabhava* encourages the consideration of multiple points of view to ensure that one does not become snared through an overreliance on a single interpretation. This operates not only for the First Precept but can and should be

applied to all precepts. Just as it is dangerous to be overly reliant on a single understanding of the First Precept, regardless of whether it is a literal, compassionate, or ultimate, so too is it inappropriate to focus too heavily on only one precept. Buddhist teachings point to an understanding that all these moral guidelines, from the specific precepts to the larger Eightfold Path which holds them, when examined closely enough can be found reflected and fully formed within each other.<sup>218</sup> As military chaplains are most closely associated with the rhetoric of the First Precept due to the violence inherent in their chosen institution, this has been the focus of this research, however the methods, trajectories, and considerations uncovered through the Three Views can be applied to any moral concern or aspect of life that might be encountered in this world.

## **Limitations**

The above discussions appear to be consistent within the larger trajectories of Buddhist development both in the United States and within Buddhist tradition overall, however this research does contain limitations which must be acknowledged. The largest limitation of this study was already discussed in *Chapter 3: Methodology*, namely the small sample size. Given the small population of Buddhist chaplains and the smaller fraction who agreed to participate in this project, a single outlying viewpoint could easily skew the results of this project in an unforeseen direction. Furthermore, as this study was based on participant willingness, those chaplains who did choose to participate may have self-selected for those who already have clearer understandings of their own ethical

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<sup>218</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Heart of Buddha's Teaching*, 58.

framework, again skewing the results to indicate a level of consistency which might not exist in the chaplain population overall. Given the relative newness of Buddhist chaplaincy in the US military, this study was necessarily limited to a cross-sectional study of chaplaincy rather than a longitudinal exploration as not enough time has passed yet to identify larger and more permanent trends in American Buddhist understanding of military service. A further limitation of this study is that it did not explore the communities from which these chaplains come from or give the opportunity for Buddhist entities which decidedly reject military service a platform to provide an opposing viewpoint. The next limitation of this study is a potential incongruity between research topic and methodological choice. Ethical inquiries often lean into questions of “how” or “why,” while phenomenological studies usually focus on “what.” The overall focus of this study was on ethical questions of “why” and “how” – why do chaplains support the military and how do they understand the First Precept – thus making grounded theory perhaps the best methodology for such an investigation. Grounded theory, however, operates on the assumption of an ongoing relationship and continued interaction with the research subjects for follow up discussions and clarifications which may be difficult with the proposed research population of military chaplains due to duty station location, operational tempo, and deployment cycles. Grounded theory also attempts to distill disparate viewpoints into a unified theory. Psychological Phenomenology was used to help ameliorate this problem of access and preserve uniqueness, but may, through its own emphasis on “what,” have skewed the focus of this research away from a direct and narrowly centered study on ethical inquiry alone. A final consideration would be to reiterate that this study was conducted using a Mahayana-based ontological process of the

Three Views. As not all participants were from the Mahayana tradition, and the Three Views is only one of numerous ontological orientations, specific points highlighted by the chaplains, such as using only a literal understanding of the precepts, may have been given less credence than attempting to understand each chaplain from the viewpoints of each internal Buddhist denomination.

### **Areas of Future Research**

Deficiencies are often able to serve as signposts for future opportunities, and many of the previously discussed limitations of this project can open the door for future research. The first area of further research would be to continue this very discussion about the First Precept, especially if a dedicated researcher, such as a current military chaplain seeking a higher degree through a military educational program, were able to establish a long term relationship with other Buddhist chaplains, thus allowing a greater depth of discussion and follow-up about the issues raised here. As mentioned above, a literal interpretation of the First Precept did appear to be used to skirt issues of personal responsibility, and a deeper discussion of this facet of ethical accountability could be more thoroughly explored. At the same time, such a discussion would need to be delicately handled, since if this use of the First Precept were verified, having it challenged might destabilize other military chaplain's coping mechanisms.

An offshoot from this discussion would be a larger exploration of the systematic pressures born especially by Buddhist chaplains of Asian descent. This research has voiced some of the problems and biases when discussing personal responsibility in the face of larger systemic processes, as well as the potential positive role of spiritual bypass

as a defense or coping strategy. Future research into these topics may be subsumed in larger explorations of social and cultural pressures faced by Asian communities. Further research could also be conducted surrounding the mental health pressures faced by Asian service members in general. This could include mental health stigma and the dynamics which lead to its under-reporting, and a dedicated investigating of how to establish a more accurate picture of the mental health burdens, both qualitative and quantitative, of Asian service members across the board.

Just as this project created a dedicated examination of Buddhist chaplains, future researchers may create a similar platform for the military chaplain's home communities. This may lead to a better understanding of how these communities view the military service of the chaplains they are supporting, as well as their own specific ethical concerns. This exploration could include discussions about how varying interpretations of precepts, especially viewed in either relational or absolute frameworks, might challenge the home community's ethical stances based on either religious, cultural, or social traditions. This could then create a better mutual point of connection between the chaplains and their denominations.

Within the chaplain community itself, further research into the role of pastoral authority and the ways in which these chaplains have successfully operated as agents of change could also be explored. The data uncovered in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain* showed some chaplains voicing concern over their perception that Buddhist chaplains do not stand up for themselves and too easily accept anything that is handed down to them from their command, indicating a ripe field of research regarding chaplain attitudes and responsibility towards authority. This could be especially relevant as this

topic could be explored from both a monastic and a military perspective as both temple and military institutions operate on strict hierarchies. Following up on the burdens of the chaplain, given the types of challenges uncovered in this research, a dedicated exploration into chaplain self-care methods would also be beneficial.

Furthermore, the overarching theme of Western cultural adaptation, which has often been remarked upon in this project, would serve as an excellent longitudinal study within military chaplaincy especially as more Western chaplains enculturated from birth enter the field. Such longitudinal studies could also continue the exploration of the role of violence in American Buddhist tradition and how it responds to the pressures of military violence in the service of political expediency. Finally, this type of study could go hand-in-hand with an exploration of Christian hegemony within military chaplaincy and how chaplains both engage and respond to the pressures of conformity.

## **Practical Applications**

The practical applications of this research are manifold. To begin with, this research confirms the tensions which exist between mainstream perceptions of Buddhism as non-violent and highlights points of disconnection between the chaplains and their home communities. In this disconnection are opportunities as this research may serve as a resource for local faith communities in the United States to gain a better understanding of both the role and function of military chaplains. This provides a better insight into the chaplain's experiences which can be used to help develop better forms of support for currently serving military chaplains or considerations for congregational members who are considering military service. This research may also help highlight the need for the

development of a larger range of endorsement organizations which can speak directly to each individual chaplain's Buddhist denomination, drawing the chaplain and their home denomination into closer community. This will allow a more congruent discussion between the chaplains and their endorsers about what dedicated forms of support are needed for individual chaplains and speak directly to the chaplain's and the community's specific Buddhist texts, ritual forms, and overall outlook.

With feet in both the academic and practical worlds, the dual role of deficiency and opportunity was also highlighted in some of the attitudes presented by the chaplains. The greatest warning this research can offer is to ensure that the long presence of violence does not turn into a foregone acceptance of it, and that while minimization of harm may be a step in the path towards upholding the Buddha's way, it is not the final goal or achievement. Just as many Buddhist societies have tipped into a glorification of military violence in the past, the same seeds for the justifications and reasoning that have historically been used to permit gross abuses and a reveling in the attachments of hatred and greed, have been voiced in this research. While this research has sought to place Buddhism's role in the US military within the context of Buddhist tradition overall, the actions of those representing the tradition must always be undertaken with utmost seriousness. Thankfully, this seriousness was also voiced by the chaplains and will hopefully remain a vibrant thread within the ongoing development of Buddhist military chaplaincy in the United States.

For the Buddhist chaplains themselves, this research has again highlighted deficiencies which can easily be turned into opportunities. Many of the chaplains interviewed discussed their own feelings of isolation, isolation best supported by others

who have similar direct experience, i.e. other Buddhist chaplains. This research has highlighted that the feelings of isolation are neither singular nor unique and many of those researched feel the need for internal chaplain support. By understanding that the individual is not alone, this may help prompt chaplains from within the military community to reach out to others and begin the process of forming internal support networks. The chaplains in this study explored opportunities for this, ranging from a desire for clinical and professional support networks such as those taking the form of academic conferences, as well as the need for spiritual and ritualistic support for helping to address the burdens of vicarious trauma. Such internal support networks would be able to help further the discussion of tensions with the First Precept that were discussed by these chaplains, most specifically the role of mindfulness and weapons use. Such support could also address what appeared to be an attitude of equal parts apathy and helplessness when the chaplains faced the role of violence in the overall command. Discussion on how best not to allow Buddhist teachings to slide into condoning excess violence would be beneficial as this is something which some chaplains view occurring in the support of weapons use. Open communication between both chaplains and between chaplains and larger society was viewed as one of the major starting points for rectifying isolation and ensuring that the First Precept and what it teaches are not forgotten in a military context. Internal support structures would provide a forum to continue the ongoing discussion of what actions should be upheld or avoided ethically, and what considerations might inform such decisions in different contexts. Internal support structures developed by and for military chaplains would also create a place to explore the role of pastoral authority, provide community support for unified plans of

action to uphold Buddhist autonomy as a minority faith tradition, and help promote the continued enhancement of clinical pastoral skills informed directly by Buddhist tradition for Buddhist practitioners.

Currently, it appears that a majority of Buddhist chaplains are of Asian descent, and so another opportunity which exists at this point is how to mold the nascent Buddhist Chaplain Corps into a form with internal organizational culture, attitudes, and emphasis which will be able to resist erasure from larger cultural trends. This research has already uncovered an undercurrent of unease surrounding the ability of Buddhist chaplains to advocate for themselves. As the number of Buddhist chaplains grow, it will become easier to simply follow the path of least resistance which may be conformity to Christian normative standards of ritual service, spiritual care, and soteriological outlook. Given the smaller size of the Buddhist Chaplain Corps at this point in time, there remains the opportunity to determine if there is a consensus among chaplains about what Buddhist military spiritual care can look like. If such a consensus is established, then Buddhist military chaplaincy will be in a much better position to pass on such understandings to newly commissioned chaplains who may not have grown up in Buddhist households or experienced prolonged periods of monastic formation.

This research also discovered the seeds of potentially new directions for the continued formation of the Buddhist Chaplain Corps. The chaplain's reported perception of the value of non-judgement in establishing therapeutic relationships could provide the foundation for new forms of spiritual intervention which are not based on imposing set values, but rather in allowing individual meaning to be cultivated in a holistic manner that can integrate the spiritual into other aspects of life. Such meaning might increase

resiliency as it is based personally on each service member's own understanding of their context and not predicated on already-established denominational beliefs. The resistance to allow such a personalized foundation of beliefs from military chaplains of other religious traditions has already been noted above by some of the research participants, making this a potentially unique area of development for Buddhist military chaplains.

Research such as this, ongoing development of endorsing organizations, and further engagement by home faith communities can all serve to bolster military chaplains. The greatest form of support which this research has indicated for the ongoing engagement in the First Precept and all other forms of practice mirrored in this first teaching must be undertaken by those who already have direct access to the chaplains and military structures. Such actors must have mutual first-hand knowledge of the burdens and questions shared by military chaplains, and who can directly witness the impact of specific choices over the long-term. These individuals are the Buddhist military chaplains themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, as the viewpoints of literal, relational, and absolute considerations of the First Precept come together, a holistic understanding of the chaplains and their outlooks at last take shape. The chaplains mostly demonstrated a surprising uniformity in role and activity in their daily military operations and in their origins from Asian monastic culture. This uniformity began to shift in their discussions of the First Precept, presenting primarily literal and relational understandings, while all fully believing that they were upholding their First Precept within the context of their military service. Their

understanding of their responsibility towards the violence inherent within the military appeared to be the most problematic aspect of this research. There were dissenting voices on the appropriateness of weapons training, an insistence and distancing of the self from the ubiquitous violent nature of humanity and human history, and a continuation of conceptions surrounding intention and protection which can be used to mitigate harm but have also historically been used to perpetrate it as well. At the same time, this appeared balanced with a heartfelt focus on addressing the human suffering present in military communities through an adherence to compassion. Finally, in terms of the burdens these chaplains face, this compassion towards suffering may not have been fully applied to the chaplains themselves. The strain of isolation from both other chaplains and from home communities appeared to create suffering which the First Precept would obligate the chaplains to address.

*Chapter 2: Literature Review* demonstrated instances in which all of the arguments used by the chaplains in this research, from protecting others, changing intention, and compassion overriding negative karma, have been used to legitimize military aggression. At the same time, these failures speak directly to the necessity of a careful precept practice as discussed above in the absolute viewpoints and the necessity to carefully examine each specific situation before choosing a course of action. While this is dissatisfying to readers who may desire a clear-cut yes or no conclusion to the role of the First Precept in military service, like many other facets of life it is far more complicated. It is imperative to remember that an understanding of cultural authority, as discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, requires all etic researchers to accept as authentic the real-world practices and behaviors of those being studied. This research has

demonstrated that to reduce each chaplain's personal struggle with the First Precept to a preconceived answer can lead either to the challenge of the chaplains by their home communities as most thoroughly outlined in *Theme 9: The Burdens of the Chaplain*, or in condoning the worst political motivations for warfare as occurred during World War II, outlined in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*. While a literal understanding of the First Precept is an excellent and necessary starting point, researchers may do well to take a lesson from these chaplains and the chaplains' engagement with both their service members and their precept practice. By beginning from a place of compassion and acknowledging each individual chaplain's context through non-judgement, knowing that for some the First Precept in all its facets are being maintained while in others the burdens of military service or personal introspection may be overwhelming, this should allow for the understanding that the First Precept can be maintained in military service.

If it is determined that the First Precept is not being maintained, then it might be appropriate to ask how those outside of this struggle might act to assist rather than alienate those who are grappling with this most urgent ethical question. The limitations outlined in this chapter have underscored that this project is the beginning, rather than the end of this ethical consideration. There are other areas from which to view this topic, and other trajectories through which further academic research would be of help. This project has also uncovered concerns which the chaplains must face at this very moment, and the burdens which they are currently bearing require practical, rather than academic responses. While such practical responses are outside of this project's purview, those with the intention and ability to offer such assistance can utilize this project's

encapsulated outline of who these chaplains are, what they believe, and what they face, to help in creating both proactive, informed and creative interventions.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

With an understanding of the implications of this research, this final chapter will serve to outline the key findings which the phenomenological themes explored in the previous chapter have brought to light. These findings will address the original research questions of this project, namely who these Buddhist chaplains are, how they understand the First Precept of “Do not kill,” how they conceive of their own responsibility and tensions towards the violence committed by their military institutions, and what burdens they face due to their military service. The findings were analyzed through the Three Views or *trīsvabhava*. This framework first offers a literal understanding of how these chaplains engage the First Precept in their military service. This is followed by a relational or compassionate understanding of their actions, involving a deeper consideration of the impact of the chaplains’ actions on the greater wellbeing of their service members. Finally an absolute viewpoint asks how these chaplains can uphold the First Precept in an interconnected world of which violence is an inherent part. This chapter will then review the relevance of this research in relationship to previous academic studies, gaps in prior research, and how this study’s key findings either uphold or challenge predominant understandings of the relationship between Buddhism and institutional violence. After addressing these current gaps, the subsequent application of this research, both academic and practical, will be explored, coupled with a discussion of the limitations which this project faced. This will then lead to an overview of future areas which can use this research as a progenitor, before closing this entire project with some concluding remarks.

## Key Findings

The first area of exploration in this project focused on contextualizing the Buddhist military chaplains. These chaplains spent their days advising their commands concerning ethical and cultural practicalities as they impacted both troop resiliency and local populations. The chaplains also provided Buddhist religious support, primarily through weekly religious services, and direct troop support through one-on-one counseling and ministry of presence. These Buddhist chaplains were overwhelmingly first- or second-generation immigrants from Asian nations, all were male, and they represented several different denominations of Buddhism from within the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. Most of the chaplains had been ordained temple monastics prior to commissioning in the US Armed Forces, and many of the chaplains explored sources of tension in cultural assimilation, especially when it came to the more assertive forms of Western pastoral authority and self-advocacy. Of all branches of the military, the US Army was the most represented, though Buddhist chaplains are currently present in all major branches of the US military, when accounting for both active and reserve components, except for the US Coast Guard. All of the chaplains, regardless of denomination, were endorsed by the Buddhist Churches of America, a Japanese Pure Land organization, which is currently the only endorsing body for chaplains for the Department of Defense. The chaplains also maintained connections with their home communities to a greater or lesser extent. All of the chaplains were religious minorities in their command and were required, with different levels of resistance, to conform to primarily Christian forms of religious expression, either institutionally through Christian-informed ordination and endorsement requirements, to locally, with the pressure to hold

religious services only on Sundays. While some of the chaplains interviewed were prior-enlisted, most of the chaplains either stated or implied that they had little understanding of the necessities and challenges of military service prior to commissioning.

Concerning the First Precept, “Do not kill,” most of the chaplains either upheld a literal or a compassionate understanding of this precept. For literal understandings, many chaplains stated that because all military chaplains are prohibited from bearing weapons by regulation, and that they were therefore not killing anyone directly, there was no tension between their military service and their Buddhist vows. Compassionate understandings usually underscored, but did not emphasize, a literal understanding. Instead the chaplains focused on the need to serve others and be with them in their suffering as the most common example of how the First Precept can be upheld in a military setting. The role of non-judgement as a conduit to engage in helping relationships with people of different faith traditions and outlooks was heralded as one of the primary mechanisms in addressing the burdens of violence carried by service members and in providing a gateway towards mitigating the damage of engaging in violence or in the overall stressors of military service.

The chaplains also focused on mitigating harm, usually presented in terms of karma and intention. Many of the chaplains stated that if one’s intention is not influenced by anger or joy in violence, then the karmic and spiritual burdens of killing can be lessened even if killing still takes place. In supporting their service members, this led to many of the chaplains emphasizing both shifting one’s intention towards ideas of guardianship prior to killing, and in changing one’s intention about how to establish meaning after killing. Many of the chaplain comments on violence and the First Precept,

from the impact of intention on karma, to guardianship and the minimization of harm, echoed arguments which were used to justify unilateral wartime aggression by historical Buddhist practitioners, such as Japan's use of Buddhist teachings during World War II as discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*.

In working with the First Precept, precept practice was presented as a linear progression of checking one's intentions, modifying intention or understanding, leading to changes in behavior. This was done in an effort to move towards an overall reduction of suffering. Using precepts as practice rather than as rules, allowed more diverse responses in varying situations without the constraints of unyielding ethical guidelines. At the same time, no chaplain voiced a logical extension of this process, namely creating a feedback process where the new behaviors are again checked against an understanding of the precepts, leading to further insights or continued modification of behavior. This may be a valuable addition, as meaning and understanding can change over time with new experiences, and this addition also provides an avenue to engage with actions even if they prove to be mistakes or if moral regression or new challenges emerge. This method of using precepts as something other than an iron-clad rule did not appear to extend to an allowance of the chaplain personally engaging in killing, and none of the chaplains voiced supporting or engaging in violence in any situation whatsoever.

The third area of research explored how the chaplains viewed their overall responsibility in supporting those who do kill, especially as it relates to the First Precept of neither killing nor encouraging others to kill. Most of the respondents appeared to try and distance themselves from responsibility towards military violence, often citing the universal presence of violence in the world and the impossibility of completely ending it.

Many chaplains commented on violence as a permanent fixture in the world and so redirected the conversation towards the top priority of minimizing harm. Very few Buddhist chaplains interviewed were willing to extend their own support of the military to a personal accountability of the greater harm done to others, even though the chaplain's duty and ability to uphold troop resiliency may naturally lead to militaries being both more efficient and effective. The chaplains often drew a stark line between themselves and the karma of the service members and presented this as evidence for the chaplain's lack of involvement in military violence. This was surprising since Buddhist understandings of interconnection and mutuality are found in most Buddhist denominations within all major traditions. This again appeared to indicate some level of spiritual bypass in acknowledging the chaplain's own actions as supporting military institutional violence overall, even if the chaplain's actions did not directly lead to increased violence for individual service members. As discussed in *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*, it should be remembered that there are deeper dynamics at play which are impacted by larger systemic processes which make the concept of personal responsibility more nuanced. Care should also be taken when discussing spiritual bypass as well, as it could indicate a defense mechanism rather than a deficiency in chaplain understanding. Cross-cultural means of communication should also be considered when drawing these conclusions as some chaplain comments could be interpreted as recognizing this responsibility despite not explicitly being stated.

Within the question of chaplain responsibility for violence, the largest divergence of opinion appeared to be over the question of using Buddhist mindfulness techniques in weapons training. This issue appeared to create a dual relationship towards service

members both as a Buddhist chaplain who should not uphold violence, and as an officer who uses any tool available to support their troops in mission accomplishment, which would include weapons qualifications. Some chaplains categorically prohibited the use of Buddhist teachings in training others in weapons use, while other chaplains viewed this practice as acceptable. For those who viewed it as acceptable, several rationales were offered, such as the majority of service members never being in frontline combat, and weapons qualifications being required for career advancement rather than killing, even for non-combat job descriptions. Many Buddhist chaplains readily presented a causal chain of conditions which led to more suffering if they did not assist in weapons training, such as failed weapons quals leading to ostracization within their unit, increased pressure from leadership, and missed career advancement which would, in turn, lead to greater distress relationally or financially at home. None of the chaplains presented a theoretical scenario where mindfulness and weapons training would lead to increased suffering, such as better trained troops being able to more skillfully kill others in the heat of battle or better facilitate murder attempts on despised commanders. This understanding that help with weapons training may increase harm remained absent despite troop-on-troop violence being mentioned as a concern by some of the Buddhist chaplains. This demonstrated another point of avoidance which may further indicate a form of spiritual bypass among some chaplains in recognizing the potential harm of their actions as discussed above.

Further ethical tensions were also highlighted in the chaplain's relationship to the overall command. With only one notable exception discussed in *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*, these tensions usually took the form of another type of dual

relationship between upholding the ethical viewpoint that violence is not something to be glorified, with an equally expressed allegiance to both the command and the troops the chaplain served who are encouraged to be skilled in violence. To not uphold the command's outlook appeared to lead to distance in relationship from leadership and less likelihood of being able to influence command decisions. Surprisingly, both the chaplains who clearly advocated against violence and those who simply remained silent appeared to have the same limited impact on command decisions.

The final area of research centered on the burdens of being a chaplain, especially as it pertained to the First Precept. The greatest area where these burdens appeared focused on various forms of isolation. All of the chaplains explored tensions, some resolved, some not, between themselves and their home religious communities when it came to the community's support of military chaplaincy. This appeared to create distance between the chaplains and their home communities where they might otherwise receive support in their work as religious professionals. This isolation from home communities was also due to physical distancing as the chaplains were posted in many geographically diverse locations, both domestic and international, making direct connection and support from their home communities not always possible.

The Buddhist chaplains also shouldered isolation from Buddhist tradition in general. This was due to having very few self-identified Buddhist practitioners physically present at their specific duty stations, and far fewer monastic or chaplain peers available for processing and reflection during difficult times. Some chaplains mentioned marriage and disrobing, indicating the potential for tension between chaplains and their home communities surrounding other Buddhist doctrinal issues which may not be readily

noticeable when addressing purely military issues. The chaplains interviewed also spoke about the vicarious trauma of holding so much of the suffering of others within themselves without spiritually supportive outlets. Some of the chaplains spoke of the need for spiritual or ritualistic support, while others spoke about the need for clinical and professional support from other Buddhist practitioners. As already mentioned, the dual relationships between the chaplain's Buddhist tradition and their command priorities, including enhancing troop resiliency for mission accomplishment, appeared to lead to internal tension within the chaplains, with few outlets for processing these ongoing concerns. As seen above, some chaplains lamented the slow enculturation of primarily first- and second-generation immigrants into Western styles of self-advocacy between themselves and their military command as well as between themselves as religious leaders and their home communities. This ability towards self-advocacy may be impacted by the hierarchical structures enforced by both monastic and military social norms. Ultimately, while the topic of selfcare was not entirely absent from the discussion, many of the chaplains did not appear to equate selfcare with upholding the First Precept of not taking actions which harm life, in this case not taking actions which would prevent harm or enhance their own wellbeing.

One aspect of Buddhist chaplaincy which has already been discussed offers an opportunity in response to the pressures of conformity. In terms of interfaith dynamics, non-judgement appeared to be the greatest area of opportunity for Buddhist chaplains to provide a unique form of support to service members. Some chaplains noted that predominately Christian chaplains were resistant to the idea that individuals could establish their own personal spiritual meaning, instead emphasizing adherence to

doctrinal beliefs established through proselytization. The Buddhist chaplains also noticed how some service members resisted this metaphysical stance, and subsequently were able to establish helping relationships with these service members through non-judgement. This allowed the service members to retain their own sources of meaning and autonomy while still allowing the Buddhist chaplains to assist in personal reflection and processing of difficult experiences. The chaplains reported that as their Buddhist framework allowed for different sources of meaning, this provided a unique opportunity for spiritual support which the interviewed chaplains did not express seeing elsewhere.

All of the chaplains viewed a literal understanding of the First Precept for themselves as the initial gateway and benchmark for their own behavior. Stemming from this personal adherence to a literal ethical understanding, the chaplains then presented a more varied understanding of appropriate ethical action when turning to a wider consideration of the impact of their actions on overall wellbeing. This wellbeing sometimes took the form of maintaining relationships with their command, or ensuring the autonomy and dignity of those they helped through non-judgement. As the direct impact of the chaplain's actions became less immediately obvious, variations in consideration and what constituted correct action were discovered. As understanding turned to an absolute viewpoint, areas for greater consideration were discovered focusing on the hope for more dedicated consideration of the full impact of supporting military institutions. Intention and karma were utilized, along with a historical understanding of the sometimes problematic nature of these tools, even in the face of unreconcilable violence in the world at large. The ultimate findings of this research uncovered a lesson which anyone, military or civilian, may utilize, and is no less important for already

having already been espoused by others. Ethical reflection and consideration is never complete and must be revisited as a continual part of one's decision making process.

## **Academic Relevance**

This research project attempted to resolve several gaps within current scholarship surrounding Buddhist military service. As outlined in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, most scholarship has been focused on doctrinal or scriptural resources in relationship to military service and Buddhist tradition. This research has shown that the scriptures themselves have been carefully studied in Western academic circles and in American faith communities. However, the ongoing living relationship between Buddhist teachings and the modern societies that uphold them in a military context have yet to fully enter the mainstream dialogue of how Buddhism can be practiced in the United States, especially in a military context. The academic exploration of how Buddhism is practiced in the United States and the availability for Americans to experience such practices has mostly been confined to a discussion of current civilian faith communities, local temple congregations, and denominational organizations which, as this research has shown, often hold views that are in tension with the Buddhist military chaplains themselves, even within the same denomination.

As faith communities are the primary ambassadors to mainstream American perceptions of the role and focus of Buddhism, a potential bottleneck may be formed in fully understanding how chaplains see themselves upholding Buddhist tradition within a military context. There has been some formal research done into the role of Buddhism in modern militaries, but as explored in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, this has mostly been

relegated to other countries. Research which has focused on military chaplains in the United States has primarily focused on Christianity and Christian views of chaplaincy and military service. As mentioned in *Chapter 1: Introduction, Problem, and Purpose*, while an interfaith dialogue may prove beneficial at some point in the future, until a solid foundation of how Buddhists understand military chaplains for themselves as identified by their own tradition is established, such an interfaith exchange may prove premature. As demonstrated through this research, without such a foundational understanding of Buddhism's role in the US military by both the Buddhist chaplains themselves and by American mainstream perspectives writ large, the result is pressure on the Buddhist chaplains to conform in both form and function to Christian normative standards, creating a disservice to the autonomy of the Buddhist tradition.

This research therefore performs the important academic function of beginning the dialogue directly with the Buddhist chaplains who have first-hand knowledge of both the US military and the tensions that arise between their religious tradition and their military service. This study forms a cross-section analysis which may hopefully provide a foundation for future longitudinal studies on the development and shifts in Buddhist military chaplaincy, especially as most Buddhist chaplains at this time were not born and raised within the confines of American culture. By engaging directly with Buddhist chaplains, this study challenges academic doctrinal views of Buddhism as fully pacifistic, as well as further extends academic social investigations which have mostly studied Buddhism's integration into formal military structures in other countries. This research also hopes to expand mainstream viewpoints about what Buddhism can entail outside of stereotypical views of robed monks sitting atop misty mountaintops. As mainstream

familiarity continues to accrete, new challenges to Western cultural authority may also be formed. This study has touched upon several of these facets, such as the role of ordination and endorsement in military chaplaincy which were formed with a decidedly Christian understanding of these activities, to how religious services are carried out on military bases. This study has also engaged with the discussion of chaplaincy and Buddhism being reduced from a spiritual tradition to a secular form of behavioral mental health, though the chaplains interviewed implied that this is impacting all of military chaplaincy regardless of faith tradition.

### **Bracketing and Personal Relevance**

As the bracketing process of psychological phenomenology comes to a close in this project, a final comment about my own journey through this research may be in order. The greatest takeaways from this project for myself and what I would offer those who may not be pursuing military chaplaincy or academic pursuits, is a deep suspicion of easy answers. As levels of complexity increase, the number of considerations increase as well, usually resulting in an earnest answer which cannot categorically state if something is right or wrong. Hypothetical situations can never be crafted well enough to take into account all variables which present in the real-world. Despite this, this research reaffirmed my understanding of the need for an external set of values which can be used to measure responses against. Reflecting upon the lives and experiences of the chaplains in this research project, I find myself again returning to non-judgement and compassion as primary values which can guide the application of ethical rules. This might be the deeper understanding which the chaplains were trying to communicate to me when they

said that they can't make decisions for other people – not because they cannot see a right answer, but because no one can ever know someone else's story, and so all that can be genuinely left is compassion and non-judgment even for the question of killing and the First Precept. Despite my own moral stances, I cannot personally find fault with anything presented by the chaplains throughout this project, and can see myself easily acting in similar ways in similar situations. Rules best serve as starting points, not conclusions to any situations which we face, even if the ultimate conclusion still matches the rule. Multiple, even contradictory, truths can be all be true at the same time. Exhausting as it may be, when ethics are honestly being struggled with, the truly conscientious starting point will always be gray.

## **Limitations**

The limitations in this study indicate that the conversation begun through this research not end here. The small sample size in this project demonstrates that there are further voices which were not included in this study. This was due to the operational tempo of the military and a lack of centralized demographic and contact information about serving military chaplains. Methodological procedures were used to ameliorate this limitation, which themselves needed to be balanced. Psychological phenomenology presents an excellent granular view of each participant but cannot account for the whole, while grounded theory glosses over differences in the pursuit of a unified understanding. While this research made piecemeal use of these methodological processes, neither were able to be used to the fullest extent of their capabilities. Furthermore, this process created a cross-sectional snapshot of who these chaplains are today, a snapshot which cannot

account for how these individuals will develop as their military careers progress or as future Buddhist chaplains enter military service. Finally, it is necessary to remember that all the data collected in this project may have been influenced by a self-selection bias, as each chaplain that was contacted had the freedom to either accept or reject the invitation to take part in this project. The views of those who speak the loudest are sometimes confused with the views of the majority simply because they are the only ones who are heard. Given that some chaplains interviewed lamented the passivity of Buddhist chaplains in general, this should caution readers that the views uncovered here may not fully represent the understandings of those who chose not to participate, despite all Buddhist chaplains wearing the same religious insignia on their uniforms. Even in the face of these limitations, the first steps towards understanding this new area of both American culture and Buddhist understanding were able to take place.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several areas of future research have already been noted in *Chapter 5: Data Synthesis and Discussion*. The first area of future research builds upon the suggestion for creating an equal platform for Buddhist home communities to explain their own viewpoints and intentions behind supporting military chaplains. By understanding these organization's hopes for the role and priorities of military chaplains, such research may offer a further bellwether for how either the First Precept or any other Buddhist teaching evolves or metastasizes through continued contact with military structures in the United States. Such research will also naturally turn toward the role and development of new Buddhist endorsing bodies. How such endorsing bodies come about, and their own

motivations in endorsing chaplains may be a worthwhile area of exploration as it is difficult to believe that the Buddhist Churches of America will permanently remain the only endorsing body for Buddhist military chaplaincy.

Another major area of exploration uncovered through this research is how chaplains view their own pastoral authority in relationship to military structures as well as the overall enculturation of, at this moment, a predominately first- and second-generation immigrant Buddhist Chaplain Corps. Tracking the changes that occur as more of those born and raised in the United States enter military chaplaincy is an area of research which can use this project as a baseline. Determining how Asian-American chaplains maintain their religious and cultural autonomy, outside of the ethical emphasis in this research, can help situate this facet of the overall Asian experience in the United States. Such an exploration will also determine how such Asian voices maintain themselves both within Buddhist chaplaincy circles as well as in relationship to the military commands in which they serve.

Finally, as a cross-sectional exploration of ethical understandings, this research can serve as a starting point for an ongoing longitudinal exploration of how Buddhist military chaplains understand the First Precept. This may prove especially compelling as the military continues to recruit new Buddhist chaplains with different backgrounds who will replace those chaplains who are currently serving. As discussed in *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, ethical stances within the military may shift as history progresses, and so with an ongoing turnover of Buddhist chaplains in the military, the ebb and flow of their ethical viewpoints is something that could be continually monitored.

## **Conclusion**

Military chaplains operate at the forefront of a consideration of action and harm. This is the primary emphasis of the First Precept. While ethical questions may not always focus on the biological ending of life, the ability of one's actions to cause physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering in both the individual and in others must always be held in constant consideration. This consideration holds true whether or not a specific individual wears a uniform. The responsibility of current American Buddhists as heirs to Buddhist heritage can be better informed and highlighted by an understanding of how and why Buddhist military chaplains have come into being in the United States Armed Forces. The ways in which these chaplains engage directly with the question of military violence as informed by the First Precept can serve as a guide for many other types of ethical considerations, and the methods in which such challenges are met can help inform both military and civilian alike when faced with any major ethical decision.

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## Appendix: Institutional Review Board

### University of the West Institutional Review Board

#### Request for Approval of Research

#### IRB Application Protocol Form – (v: 3/18/14)

Written approval of this research by the IRB is required **PRIOR** to initiating the research (e.g., recruiting participants or collecting **ANY** data in all but archival studies). Submit this Application Protocol to your campus IRB with the **Application Protocol Submission Checklist** and supporting materials. Include required appendices as part of this document.

<b>Date:</b> 24 April 2023
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<b>Title of Study</b> Do Not Harm Life: Buddhist Military Chaplains and the First Precept
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#### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (PI)

<b>Name:</b> R. August Peterson	<b>Title:</b> DBMin Candidate
<b>Department:</b> Buddhist Chaplaincy	<b>Campus:</b> University of the West
<b>Mailing Address:</b> 25950 Via Oro	<b>Email Address:</b> sunahnn@gmail.com
<b>Phone Number:</b> 757-389-2496	<b>Student ID (if applicable):</b> 11501106

#### CO-INVESTIGATORS

<b>Name:</b> N/A	<b>Title:</b> N/A
<b>Mailing Address:</b> N/A	<b>Email Address:</b> N/A

<b>Name:</b> N/A	<b>Title:</b> N/A
<b>Mailing Address:</b> N/A	<b>Email Address:</b> N/A

**NOTE:** If additional investigators are included, please list them below, including name, title, mailing address, and e-mail address.

For all research in which the Principal Investigator (PI) is a student, please also complete the following:

<b>UWest Faculty Sponsor/Project Chairperson:</b> Jitsujo Gauthier	<b>Title:</b> Associate Professor
<b>Program, School, and Campus:</b> Buddhist Chaplaincy, University of the West	<b>Email Address:</b> jitsujo@uwest.edu

Is this a revision of a previously reviewed protocol?

<b>Yes</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>No</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Type of research proposed (Check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Pilot</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Student</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Faculty</b>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Staff</b>

Level of risk to human participants in proposed research (Check that which is relevant):

	1 – <b>NO RISK</b> ( <i>No Risk</i> means that the study has no social, psychological or physical danger to participants; see <i>Systematic Guidelines for the Protection of Human Participants in Research</i> for details).
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2 – <b>MINIMAL RISK</b> ( <i>Minimal Risk</i> means that the probability of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater than those ordinarily encountered during the performance of routine physical, psychological, or educational examinations or tests).
	3 – <b>MODERATE RISK</b> ( <i>Moderate Risk</i> means that the risk to participants is beyond what would normally be experienced in typical daily life. The study may involve intrusive questions or procedures or use protected populations (e.g., infants, prisoners, etc.)).
	4 – <b>HIGH RISK</b> ( <i>High Risk</i> means that participants may be exposed to risk that may have lasting psychological or physical consequences).

**NOTE:** Levels 3 and 4 must be reviewed by the full IRB Committee.

Does the research focus on or seek to enroll participants from any of the following vulnerable categories? If so, check ALL that apply. If none apply, check the final box only.

	Chronic physical or mental condition
	Cognitively impaired
	Current and/or former patients of investigator(s) or faculty sponsor
	Institutionalized (e.g., hospitalized, hospice, assisted living, residential treatment)
	Limited or non-readers
	Mentally ill
	Military personnel to be recruited for the study by military personnel
	Minors
	Poor/uninsured
	Pregnant women
	Prisoners
	Terminally ill
	Wards of the state (e.g., foster children)
	Students or employees of PI, study staff, or research sponsor
	Students to be recruited in their educational setting (e.g., in class or at school)
	Others vulnerable to coercion ( <b>Specify</b> )
<b>x</b>	The research does <b>NOT</b> focus on or seek to enroll participants from vulnerable categories

**Is the research funded in whole or in part by an outside agency (e.g., a grant or contract) or have you applied for funding?**

<b>x</b>	<b>No</b>
	<b>Yes, the research has been funded</b>
	<b>Yes, proposal is under review by outside agency</b>

If yes, list sponsoring agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Grant/award number (if funded): \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator of grant/contract: \_\_\_\_\_

**Is any special expertise above and beyond that represented on the IRB required to evaluate this protocol? (e.g., prisoners [need prison representative to review]; medical review [for medically-related invasive procedures or interventions])**

<b>x</b>	<b>No</b>
	<b>Yes</b>

If yes, please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

**Statement of Investigator(s):**

The signature(s) of the investigator(s) indicates agreement with the following:

***This research will be conducted in accordance with procedures described in this protocol and approved by the IRB, university policies which govern research***

*with human participants, and applicable laws in the state and country in which the research is conducted.*

**Signatures:** (An electronic signature is acceptable for protocols submitted in electronic form).

**Principal Investigator:** R. August Peterson **Date:** 24 April 2023

Student investigators must also obtain the signature of a faculty sponsor/chairperson before the protocol can be submitted. An email from the faculty sponsor's UWest email to the research office (e.g., the office that accepts IRB protocols for your campus address) is acceptable as an alternative. This email must contain the statement below along with the title of the research and the PI's name.

**I have read and reviewed this application for completeness and accuracy, and I approve it as submitted.**

**Signature of UWest Faculty Sponsor:** Submitted via email by Doctoral Chair to IRB Member for Student's file 5/19/23

**Date:** 5/19/23

**Instructions:** Please provide information on each of the following. If the question is not applicable to your study, enter "NA" or "not applicable" as your answer.

**I. STUDY OVERVIEW What is the purpose of the research? Provide a brief (1 page or less) synopsis of the specific aims of the research and why the topic is important.**

Buddhist chaplains can be cut off from both their parent traditions and from their military communities due to the seeming conflict between military service and the First Precept. Military institutions are designed to utilize violence and killing to achieve their goals, actions which for Buddhists directly call into question what is meant by the First Precept which prohibits killing. These challenges can be exacerbated since there are currently no major networks of support for military Buddhists and Buddhist service members and chaplains are often deployed in isolation as duty stations are determined by military skill set rather than religious affiliation. Within American Buddhist communities, there is a mainstream viewpoint that due to the First Precept, Buddhism is opposed to military service. This experience is exacerbated by how little has been written and presented in both academic and mainstream awareness about Buddhist chaplains in the American military. Within the military, Buddhist chaplains can find themselves at odds both with their integration into a predominantly Christian Chaplain Corps, as well as military chaplaincy training and culture which always places mission readiness as the primary overriding concern even in the face of ethical tensions between mission success and the military chaplain's spiritual tradition.

This study will interview a set of 6-10 active-duty Buddhist military chaplains and explore a number of questions. First this research will explore how predominately Buddhist countries and cultures have engaged with the First Precept in relationship to military service. This will then lead into a discussion of how American and American Buddhist communities view Buddhism's relationship to the military. To this end, there will be an exploration of how military chaplaincy in general has developed in the American Armed Forces. Some of the ethical conflicts that have arisen for service members who are also Buddhist chaplains, including a discussion of potential dual roles and relationships present in military chaplaincy and how these may impact the Buddhist chaplain's responsibilities, will be highlighted. An overview of the current published research on active-duty Buddhist chaplains in the United States and how they have viewed these tensions will be provided. Lastly, there will be an exploration of how a Buddhist military chaplain's tradition and their culture and military Buddhist community, influence the chaplain's view of their and their fellow service member's adherence to the First Precept.

This study may offer methods of establishing more nuanced ways for upholding the First Precept and perspective for Buddhist chaplains grappling between their beliefs and the call of duty. This may also offer Buddhist military chaplains a greater sense of military community as both similarities and differences in ethical engagement are brought to light. This deepening of military Buddhist chaplaincy's ethical understanding and grounding through this research can translate into overall better support for service members who seek chaplain guidance for their own ethical questions. Insights may also provide a way of responding to moral injury and vicarious trauma in both chaplains and other service members. Finally, this project may also be able to offer guidance for Buddhists considering military service in the United States, either as a chaplain or regular service member.

This project is considered to be minimum risk because participants already have a high level of spiritual and mindfulness training, have undergone professional chaplaincy training which includes personal reflection, strategies and exercises to address ethical topics and emotional distress of the specific type being studied by this project, and these participants are members of the military which provides training and resources for addressing emotionally charged and negative experiences, services and resources which are available to all service members, chaplains included. As military chaplains, discussing the topics in this research project is part of the chaplain's normal professional duties and responsibilities, and so military chaplains will already have ample experience in dealing with such topics. Furthermore, participants will receive interview questions beforehand allowing preparation for discussion, as well as being instructed in further grounding techniques prior to the interview itself. It is for these reasons that participants are not expected to encounter distress "beyond what would normally be experienced in typical daily life" for a military chaplain. This assessment is based on the background and experience of the researcher who is a fulltime chaplain with the Veterans Association and has extensive experience in both the Buddhist and military communities.

## **II. PARTICIPANTS**

**II.A. How many participants do you plan to recruit? Please indicate (a) the planned sample size, and (b) the minimum and maximum number in your study.**

The planned sample size for this project will be 8 participants, with a lower and upper limit of 6-10 participants. Personal contacts with current military chaplains will be used to recruit initial members for this project, followed by snowball recruitment and connections through military alumni of University of the West.

**NOTE:** If the number increases by more than 15% above your maximum, you will need to amend your study prior to increasing enrollment size.

**II.B. Age range of participants:** 18-72

**II.C. Inclusion criteria for participation in the research.**

Research participants will be commissioned military Buddhist chaplains across all branches of the Department of Defense, in either active or reserve components. Commissioning in the United States military already subsumes many other inclusion criteria (age 18, spiritual endorsement, education, etc.). Given the criteria for military recruitment that a chaplain must be able to complete 20 years of active-duty service before the age of 60, and that Buddhist chaplaincy began only in 2011, the maximum age range for a United States Buddhist military chaplain, assuming commissioning with 19 years of prior service in 2011 is 72 years old.

**II.D. Exclusion criteria for participation in the research.**

**NOTE:** List circumstances that will exclude someone from participation, not just the absence of inclusion criteria.

Participants will be excluded from this study if they decline to sign informed consent documents, have since abandoned their Buddhist practice in favor of a different faith system, or if the participant is a reserve component military chaplain who has never been activated for deployment.

**II.E. If you plan to enroll any members of vulnerable populations (see above), provide rationale for studying them.**

N/A

**II.F. Describe how you will ensure that selection of participants is equitable** in light of the purposes of the research and the setting in which the research will be concluded. Equity means that the opportunity to participate is available to all persons who meet the criteria for inclusion and that individuals are not excluded based on gender, ethnicity, etc., except when such exclusion is essential in light of the purpose of the research.

Given the low overall census of military Buddhist chaplains, equability will be maintained through the inclusion of all research participants who request to be included, unless excluded based on criteria discussed in II.D. Through snowball

recruitment, every effort will be made to contact every currently serving commissioned Buddhist military chaplain.

### **III. RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

#### **III.A. Describe your recruitment procedures, including any initial screening to ensure participant eligibility (attach scripts, ads, etc. in appendices).**

Recruitment will be carried out primarily through email with an Initial Email (Attachment A) outlining the project and requesting participation. Social media requests (Attachment B) will also be used to solicit email addresses to present the full recruitment request. Participants will also be asked to refer other Buddhist chaplains that they are in contact with or be requested to forward the invitation email to those chaplains. Initial emails will contain exclusionary information and any respondent who does not meet inclusion criteria will be contacted by email with an explanation. If a participant expresses interest in the project, they will receive a Welcome Email (Attachment C) which will also include an Informed Consent Form (Attachment D) and an overview of the semi-structured Interview Questions (Attachment E), and instructions for a Grounding Practice (Attachment F). If a participant agrees to this study, the researcher will request that the participant pick a time of their choosing, at least 3 days after agreeing to participate, to allow participants time to review informed consent, interview questions, and seek clarity about any potential concerns. Outside of an initial social media request that will be utilized if needed, all recruitment discussions will take place over email. All commissioned personnel meeting criteria will be accepted into this study. Participants will be requested to turn in signed consent forms (digital or manual signatures will be accepted) no later than the day of the interview.

#### **III.B. Will the participant be audio or video recorded?**

	<b>No</b>
<b>X</b>	<b>Yes</b> (Specific permission must be included in the consent form; <b>do not</b> use a separate consent for recording. Be sure to address storage, transcription, and destruction of such materials in your application and consent form).

#### **III.C. Describe what the participant will be asked to do.** Briefly outline your procedures from entry (after recruitment and screening for inclusion) to completion of the study. Include inducements offered to participants, methods of assessment, methods of assignment to group, and procedures. Be explicit in the description of any physical, psychological, occupational, or social stressors; drugs, ingested substances; experimental conditions; aversive stimuli; or any deprivations that are planned.

Accepted participants will receive a zoom link for the interview process. After an initial welcome, participants will be asked to verbally reiterate their consent for the research and be asked again if there are any questions or concerns, along with a reminder of the participant's right to cease participation at any time for any reason or to skip any specific questions. Participants will next be asked to verify their understanding of centering techniques provided in the Grounding Technique

(Attachment F) as well as their readiness to use their own centering techniques as needed in case distress from adverse events or memories appear during the interview. The researcher will then begin to ask research questions outlined in Attachment E, including listed sub-questions as needed to clarify each of the main topic areas, and leave time for reflection and contemplation by participants in formulating their responses. Upon the conclusion of the interview, the researcher will thank participants for their participation and remind them that if they have any questions or concerns that contact information can be found on the Informed Consent form (Attachment D). The researcher will be monitoring participants for signs of distress throughout the interview, including changes such as increased voice volume and tempo, increased breathing rate, and physical restlessness. If any signs of distress are noticed, the interview will stop and the researcher will inquire into the participant's wellbeing, followed by encouragement to engage in centering activities either presented in the Grounding Technique (Attachment F) or prepared beforehand by the research participant, along with the offer to cease the interview and/or call someone for support. If the participant elects to engage in any centering exercise or to cease the interview, the researcher will remain online with the participant and accompanying them in their centering exercises until the participant expresses feeling grounded/centered or until the participant has been connected with their chosen emotional support person or agency. Interviews will be semi-structured and follow the questions listed in Attachment E. Participants will be offered the opportunity to submit written responses to the questions outlined in the Interview Questions (Attachment E), if desired.

**III.D. Describe types and content of your measures.** Include interview, questionnaire, and/or survey questions (multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, etc.). Attach copies of demographic or biographical forms, and structured interviews, and any measures that are **NOT** in common use (common use measures include WISC, MMPI, BDI, NEO, CBCL, 16 PF, etc.) as appendices. For copyrighted measures, provide either a copy of the measure (this is permitted under the fair use doctrine) or a list of items/stimuli and the rating scale. For archival studies, describe the specific information you will retrieve from existing records.

Data will be collected through recorded audio semi-structured interviews or written responses based on participant preferences. Interview questions are listed in Attachment E. No other forms or copyrighted materials will be used, nor will archived studies be used.

**III.E. How long will participation take?** (Describe approximate time commitment)

Each interview will last approximately 1 hour. There will be no limit or suggested limit for written responses. If follow-up interviews are needed, they will be limited to less than 1 hour.

**III.F. Describe what will happen at the end of participants' involvement in your study.** Describe any follow-up contact you plan to have with participants. If your study

requires debriefing, please describe the process, including the approximate time between completing the study procedures and debriefing.

Upon conclusion, participants will be reminded of grounding and centering techniques if any distress arises moving forward as well as emergency numbers contained in the Informed Consent document (Attachment D), and researcher contact information will be provided if participants would like to include any extra contributions not covered during the interview. Participants will also be reminded of confidentiality measures that will be taken with their data, and words of appreciation for their participation in this project will be offered. If it is determined that follow-up interviews are needed, such as requesting clarity about written responses, discovered inconsistencies in response, or further clarification about sources cited by the participant during the interview, the research participant will be contacted with a request for an additional interview and be supplied with a written list of further questions. The follow-up interview will follow the same format as outlined in III.C. The only difference will be that follow-up interviews will be as short as possible and written responses will be highlighted as an alternative to an additional interview.

**III.G. If the study involves a treatment or intervention to ameliorate or to prevent a physical, educational, occupational, or psychological difficulty, please explain how that treatment will differ from standard care that participants would ordinarily receive.**

N/A

**III.H. Describe the setting(s) in which you will conduct the study (e.g., school, business, clinic, internet).** If you will collect data in an organization other than UWest (e.g., school, business, clinic), describe how and from whom you will obtain permission to use the site. Note that you must provide the IRB with a letter indicating an appropriate authority at the site has granted permission to gather data BEFORE initiating data collection at that site.

Interviews will take place online, with the physical location of the participants being up to each participant's discretion.

**III.I. Will you conduct any part of the study outside the United States of America?**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes (List country/countries):

**If yes,** describe research regulations or laws relevant to the conduct of research in the country in which the research will be done, and how you will comply with them.

N/A

#### **IV. RISKS AND BENEFITS**

**IV.A. What are the potential risks and benefits of participating for the individual participant?**

**NOTE:** The contributions of the research to science and participant compensation are not considered benefits to the individual.

Potential risks in this study include triggering of past traumas or negative memories which may result in increased anxiety or despondency (restlessness, sadness, etc.). Potential benefits include being able to process past events and current ethical understandings with a researcher who has experience in both the military and Buddhist communities of practice, as there are currently no formal forums of Buddhist-specific chaplain support discovered by this researcher.

**IV.B. Describe the steps you will take to minimize risk (if the study entails risk).**

Risks will be minimized through the presentation of the Grounding/Centering Technique (Attachment F) in the Welcome Email (Attachment C), reminders to come prepared with a chaplain's own preferred grounding technique prior to the interview, and through allowing participants to review interview questions and emotionally prepare for discussion before interviews begin. Emergency numbers will also be reiterated before interviews begin, and participants will be reminded that these numbers are contained in the Informed Consent form (Attachment D). The researcher will be aware of physical and verbal cues which may indicate growing emotional distress during the interview process which will result in the researcher offering either the presented or the participant's own grounding intervention. Participants will have the right to skip any specific interview questions if they desire or withdraw from the entirety of the research program in the event that distress is encountered. Participants will be reminded of all these options in both the Informed Consent form (Attachment D) and in verbal form before the interview begins.

**IV.C. Greater than minimal risk research also requires investigators to describe how they will respond to research-related injury or negative events. For greater than minimal risk studies (level 3 or 4), please complete the following two items (IV.C.1 and IV.C.2). If not applicable (i.e., your study entails minimal risk or less), indicate NA or "not applicable."**

**IV.C.1. Explain how the potential benefits from conducting the research for participants and for the field (including knowledge gained) outweigh the risks.**

N/A

**IV.C.2. Provide a detailed explanation of steps you will take to deal with any negative events that occur as a result of the participant's involvement in the research.** Specifically indicate who will be responsible for costs incurred via research-related event or injury. Remember to include this information in the consent form as well.

N/A

**V. CONSENT PROCEDURES**

**Attach all consent forms (and assent forms, if required) as appendices.**

**V.A. Describe how the consent process (and, for minors, the assent process) will be conducted** (e.g., who will conduct the consent process and what will this process entail; who will provide consent (participants, parents or guardians of minors)).

Consent will be solicited through emailed forms after a participant voices interest in the project. Informed Consent forms (Attachment D) will be emailed to the participants, who will be requested to sign and return the form prior to scheduling an interview. Review of critical aspects of informed consent, including potential distress and grounding methods, emergency numbers, methods of protecting confidentiality in data collection, and freedom to withdraw from participation at any time, along with any questions the participants may have, will take place at the start of the interview. Participants will be requested to verbally express their consent at that time.

**V.B. Describe steps you will take to prevent coercion.**

Participants will receive written assurances that participation is voluntary and withdraw from the project can take place at any time for any reason without consequence. This will be reiterated verbally at the beginning of the interview. Participant confidentiality will also be reiterated before the interview begins. The researcher will continually monitor for participant distress during the interview and offer withdraw from the study as an available intervention if distress is noted.

**V.C. Please indicate the language(s) of the participants you plan to enroll.** Consent forms and other participant materials must be in language easily understood by the participant.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	English
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other language(s) Specify:

**V.D. If you are enrolling non-English speaking participants,** please explain how you will ensure that (a) participants receive appropriate information about what participation in the research entails, (b) how you will ensure that the consent form is clear and understandable to participants, (c) how translations of research materials will be done to ensure clarity and correctness (professional translators, back translation, use of indigenous informants, etc.).

N/A

## **VI. CONFIDENTIALITY**

**VI.A. Are the data completely anonymous?** (Anonymous means that it is impossible for anyone, including the researcher, to link a specific individual with his/her data)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes

**VI.B. What provisions will be made to safeguard the confidentiality of the data?** Include provisions for de-identifying research records, ensuring that internet data cannot

be linked to specific participants, obtaining a Certificate of Confidentiality for sensitive information, etc.

Audio recordings will be transcribed, with all identifying markers removed during transcription and replaced with alpha-numeric codes. Written responses will have all identifiers removed and replaced with alpha-numeric codes. There will be no list maintained identifying alpha-numeric codes with any research participant. After transcription and coding is completed, original audio will be permanently deleted. Transcription, coding, and deletion of audio files will take place within 1 month of each specific interview. No interview transcription files will be retained with identifying information. Participant lists, with no identifiable connection to specific interview data, will be deleted at most 1 year after the conclusion of this research project. All data will be stored on password protected devices. No data with identifying information will be printed or otherwise produced or stored in a physical format. If any future publications utilize identifying information or media, consent for those specific instances will be requested at that point and only used if written consent is received.

**VI.C. Who will have access to the data?**

The research and dissertation committee will be the only individuals with access to research data. Pseudonyms or basic demographics (Navy Chaplain, Army Chaplain, etc.) will be used in any published research or data solicitations.

**VI.D. What will be done with the data (including audio or video recordings) when the study is completed? How long will the raw data be kept? Who will destroy any data that can be linked to specific participants, when, and how?**

All raw data will be deleted upon completion of this research project by the researcher, if not already deleted as described above. Participant contact information and informed consent forms will be retained for 1 year after the completion of this project and then be deleted by this researcher.

**VI.E. Will you be accessing participants' educational or medical records?**

<b>X</b>	<b>No</b>
	<b>Yes</b>

If yes, describe how you will comply with FERPA or HIPPA regulations if data are not completely anonymous.

N/A

**SPECIAL ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDIES WITH PREGNANT WOMEN**

If you plan to enroll pregnant women, **complete the following (otherwise leave blank):** The IRB reviews research according to the requirements of Federal Regulation 45 CFR 46. One section of that regulation (45 CFR 46.204 (h), (i), (j)) requires the IRB to make specific determinations whenever pregnant women are enrolled in research. If

you plan to enroll pregnant women, you must assure the board of the following by signing in the space provided below:

- No individuals involved in the research will offer any inducements, monetary or otherwise, to terminate a pregnancy;
- Individuals engaged in conducting the research will have no part in any decisions as to the timing, method, or procedures used to terminate a pregnancy; and
- Individuals engaged in conducting the research will have no part in determining the viability of a neonate.

Signature of Principal Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Faculty Sponsor (for student research):  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPEND ALL ADDITIONAL MATERIALS BELOW** (consent forms, measures, site approval letters, etc.) as part of this file.

### **Attachments:**

**Attachment A: Initial Email**

**Attachment B: Initial Social Media Inquiry**

**Attachment C: Welcome Email**

**Attachment D: Informed Consent Form**

**Attachment E: Interview Questions**

**Attachment F: Box Breathing**

### **Attachment A: Initial Email**

Good morning Sir/Ma'am

My name is August Peterson. I am a current doctoral student in Buddhist chaplaincy at the University of the West, and former Navy service member. I am currently conducting a doctoral research project exploring how Buddhist military chaplains understand and engage with the First Precept. I am looking for chaplains who would be willing to be interviewed about their thoughts and experiences of being a military chaplain with me. Interviews will take about 1 hour and look at your own understanding of the military in a Buddhist context, how you understand and uphold the First Precept in your own military work, as well as and how you interact and counsel service members.

Since there are so few Buddhist military chaplains and so little research in this field, your participation will be invaluable. If you are willing to be interviewed, please let me know

and I will send you more information about the project including specific interview questions. Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

R. August Peterson, MA, BCC-HPC  
Doctorate of Buddhist Ministry, Candidate  
University of the West  
sunahnn@gmail.com  
757-389-2496

### **Attachment B: Initial Social Media Inquiry**

Hello! My name is August Peterson. I am a UWest Buddhist Chaplaincy doctoral student and prior Navy service member, and I am conducting a study exploring how military chaplains understand the First Precept. I was wondering if you'd be willing to participate in an interview about your work as a Buddhist chaplain in relation to the First Precept. I would be happy to answer any questions about the project you might have. Is there a good email address that I can send some information to?

### **Attachment C: Welcome Email**

Good morning Sir/Ma'am

Thank you for being willing to consider talking with me about your work as a Buddhist military chaplain. I am conducting research on how Buddhist chaplains understand and work with the First Precept within the military, both for themselves and in supporting other service members. I am hoping that through this research we can build community among military Buddhist chaplains and offer insights in supporting service members who often come to us in times of crisis. To be eligible for this project you must be a commissioned Buddhist chaplain in the United States military. Reserve component chaplains must have had at least one deployment.

This study will involve an interview about your own views and practice with the First Precept as a military chaplain, and how your understanding has evolved during your time on duty both in terms of your own role as a chaplain, and how you have supported other service members. A full list of interview questions is attached to this email. All responses will be confidential, with no identifying information used for this project.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please review, sign (electronic signatures are acceptable), and return the attached Informed Consent Form, along with a time of your choosing for an interview. The interview will take about 1 hour of your time. If it would be more convenient, you may also provide written responses to the interview questions as well.

Due to the nature of military service, please be aware that some questions might bring up difficult memories, so please be prepared to utilize a favored grounding technique that you can use if you encounter difficult emotions during our discussion. I have also

attached a document outlining a simple grounding technique called “box breathing” that you can use as well. Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this research project. If you are aware of any other Buddhist military chaplains who might be interested in this project, please forward this letter to them. Please feel free to ask any questions about this project, and I look forward to speaking with you and learning more about your work as a military chaplain.

Sincerely,  
 R. August Peterson, MA, BCC-HPC  
 Doctorate of Buddhist Ministry, Candidate  
 University of the West  
 sunahnn@gmail.com  
 757-389-2496

#### **Attachment D: Informed Consent Form**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Study:** Do Not Harm Life: Buddhist Military Chaplains and the First Precept  
**Investigator:** R. August Peterson, University of the West, DBMin Candidate

#### **Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form has information to help you decide if you wish to participate. Please review it carefully. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop at any time. Please ask any questions you have about the study or this form before deciding to participate.

#### **Introduction and Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how Buddhist military chaplains understand and live out their tradition in a military setting in relationship to the First Precept – Do Not Harm Life. Given the nature of military service, this research is meant to explore how chaplains understand and experience their own precept work when operating and offering religious support in a military context.

### **Description of Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will take part in an interview about your history and understanding of your religious ministries with military personnel. Questions will explore your Buddhist background and current religious role, and your journey as a military chaplain. Questions will also include your understanding of the First Precept – Do Not Harm Life, and how/if you engage this precept in your religious ministry. Questions may explore meaningful events that influenced your relationship to the military and Buddhist practice and your relationship to your Buddhist tradition. Interviews will take place over the phone or online and will be recorded and transcribed for internal analysis. All questions will be provided to you before the interview.

#### **Expected Time or Duration of Participation:**

Interviews will last for approximately 1 hour. If follow-up contact is needed, it will be limited to less than one hour unless agreed upon by the participant.

### **Risks or Discomforts**

It is believed that the risk is minimal due to the nature of the study and steps taken to mitigate risk, but there is a chance that while participating in this study you may experience emotional discomfort if discussing sensitive topics or memories. To reduce the likelihood of emotional discomfort or distress, you will be provided with the questions ahead of time to think about and prepare your answers. You will also be provided with a Grounding Technique to mitigate these discomforts (or you may identify your preferred grounding /centering technique). In the event that the questions do trigger the need for additional emotional support, please call the Military Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255, or dial 988 for mental health support. If you believe you need more support, the researcher will assist you to find that support. Any costs due to additional care related to the study are the responsibility of the participant.

### **Benefits to You and to Others**

It is hoped that the information gained in this study will increase awareness of the role and function of pan-Buddhist traditions within United States military institutions and encourage conversation about best practices for Buddhists to conscientiously engage with military personnel. You are not expected to receive any direct benefit from this study, however a deeper understanding of your own ethical understanding and that of your chaplain-peers may lead to deeper connections in the Buddhist chaplain community and orientation towards improved engagement with service members. There is no financial incentive to participate in this study.

### **Your Rights as a Research Participant**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. During interviews or questionnaires, you can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

### **Confidentiality**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential. All data from the study will be depersonalized so that you cannot be individually identified.

To protect confidentiality, all records will be held on password-protected digital devices. Video and audio recordings will be transcribed, removing all personally identifying information. Any circulated documents will have names removed and replaced with coded markers e.g. P1 (Participant 1), etc. If any direct quotes are used, participants will

be referred to only by general identifiers (“Mahayana chaplain / Navy Chaplain,” etc.). No discussions will take place with any participant’s religious or endorsing organization or command duty station.

It is possible that the doctoral committee or IRB committee may request the data for quality assurance; however, they are bound to respect the confidentiality of the participants. All documents or recordings with identifiable data, such as the informed consent, will be deleted within a year after the study has been completed.

### **Future Use of Your Information**

Depersonalized data will be used for the dissertation. The information may also be used in future publications.

### **Oversight and Questions**

This research will be conducted by R. August Peterson, University of the West, who can be contacted at [sunahnn@gmail.com](mailto:sunahnn@gmail.com) / 757-389-2496. This research will be supervised by Dr. Jitsujo Gauthier, University of the West. Any concerns can be addressed to her at 626-571-8811 x345, or [jitsujog@uwest.edu](mailto:jitsujog@uwest.edu). If you have questions about the safety or confidentiality of the research you may contact the Uwest Institutional Review Board at [IRB@uwest.edu](mailto:IRB@uwest.edu)

### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to participate in this study and have your answers recorded. You signify that you have received a copy of this form. Make sure you understand what the study involves before you sign. You may contact the researcher if you have any questions and may withdraw from this study at any time without consequence. After the study has been completed, you may ask the researcher for a summary of aggregate results if you wish.

Participant’s Name (printed)

Participant’s Signature

Date

#### **Attachment E: Interview Questions**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. Please review the following 6 questions that we will talk about. The subheadings are different areas for you to consider, but we will not likely talk about each of those topics specifically, but we will try to talk about each of the 6 main topic areas together.

**1. Please tell me a little about yourself as a Buddhist military chaplain.**

Such as:

- a. Why did you choose to become a military chaplain?

- b. How long have you been a chaplain?
  - c. What tradition do you belong to?
  - d. What were your motivations in choosing this vocation?
  - e. What are your primary duties on a normal day? (Operational/Non-Operational)
- 2. What Buddhist ideas/teachings (Emptiness, Aggregates, etc.) primarily inform your work and motivation as a military chaplain?**
- a. How do these understandings impact your ethical outlook?
- 3. Which Buddhist texts and practices (Sutras, Shastras, prayers) primarily inform your work and motivation as a military chaplain?**
- a. How do these understandings impact your ethical outlook?
  - b. Which scriptures have your service members liked the most?
  - c. Which scriptures do you use when asked about right and wrong?
- 4. Which Buddhist practices (meditation style, chanting, ritual, etc.) primarily informs or is utilized in your work and motivation as a chaplain?**
- a. How do these practices impact your ethical outlook?
  - b. What do your service members say when you teach meditation or chanting?
- 5. What is your understanding of the First Precept and how do you manifest this in your work as a chaplain?**
- a. How do you understand your relationship and responsibility in offering support to an institution and to individuals who may kill, wound, or otherwise inflict violence on other human beings?
  - b. What is your understanding of the First Precept in relationship to the service member's military service?
  - c. How has your understanding of the First Precept changed due to your work as a military chaplain?
  - d. How do you respond when a service member asks if it's alright for a Buddhist to serve in the military?
  - e. How has your understanding of Buddhism writ large changed?
  - f. How have you struggled with right and wrong in your work?
  - g. Has the first precept ever come up?
  - h. What have you said when asked about violence?
  - i. What is it like working with people who have killed others?
- 6. How has your spiritual teacher and organization responded to your work as a Buddhist chaplain?**
- a. When you applied for endorsement prior to commissioning?
  - b. What does your teacher say about your work in the military?

**Attachment F: Box Breathing****Box Breathing<sup>219</sup>**

This practice is called Box Breathing. If at any point you feel any negative emotions or reactions are becoming distressful, the following practice can help recenter and ground yourself.

1. Inhale slowly for 8-10 seconds, or until your lungs are at capacity.
2. Hold your breath as you are able for an equal amount of time.
3. Exhale for that same amount of time slowly.
4. Hold your empty breath as you are able for the same amount of time as before.
5. Repeat until calm.

When we experience stress, fear, or anxiety, our breathing and heartbeat synchronize in preparation for the Fight, Flight or Freeze response. Box Breathing breaks the synchronizing buildup of the Fight Flight or Freeze response, and redirects brain activity to allow us to better choose how to respond to a certain situation and keep control of our emotions and responses.

Box breathing can be used when any negative emotions or reaction begins to rise. Please use this, or your own preferred technique if you feel negative emotions or anxiety begin to arise during the interview process. Please remember that you may skip any interview question or withdraw from the interview process at any with without consequence.

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<sup>219</sup> Zachary Impastato and R. August Peterson. *Spiritual Presence, Practice, and Themes: Contemplative Practices to Clarify Values and Sense of Self* (Loma Linda: VA Loma Linda Medical Center, 2020), 10.