Challenging the Notions of a Fixed Self: An Excavation Process to Support Inner Chaplaincy

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March 2025

Abstract

This capstone explores the intersection of chaplaincy, social justice, and inner transformation through the practice of inner chaplaincy. It examines how systems of power and oppression shape individual and collective experiences of suffering, reinforcing the illusion of separation and "othering." Through Buddhist teachings, the Three Tenets, and reflective inquiry, the work investigates how a "fixed self" contributes to systemic injustice and how chaplains can cultivate greater self-awareness, dismantle internalized oppression, and engage in compassionate action.

By integrating Zen Buddhist study, lived experience, and social justice frameworks, this work offers a contemplative curriculum to support chaplains in deconstructing conditioned identities and fostering connection. Drawing from personal reflection and facilitation within social change spaces, it highlights some of the moral suffering, burnout, and ethical dilemmas chaplains encounter in justice work. The capstone underscores the importance of spiritual practice in sustaining engagement with systemic injustice, advocating for a model of chaplaincy that moves beyond individual healing to collective liberation.

Ultimately, this project serves as a guide for chaplains to critically examine their positionality, challenge social conditioning, and practice radical interconnectedness. Through self-inquiry and the excavation of ingrained social habits, it calls chaplains to integrate social justice and spiritual practice, ensuring their work actively contributes to dignity, belonging, and transformation for all.

Introduction

In our last peer chaplaincy council, I facilitated our time together offering the following question: what feels vulnerable, tender and exposed after these two years of chaplaincy/service? For me, what feels tender and exposed is how much suffering I see in the world in relationship to systems of oppression, how structures of power continue to uphold the delusion that we are separate from one another, including our planet. I notice how deep the story of scarcity runs through all our collectives, the fear and intolerance of uncertainty and the residue of unnamed grief and trauma from our collective oppression that shows up in the intimacy of relationship. I have also witnessed the collective desire to come together as communities of care and belonging, the wish to practice shared accountability, the intention of creating cherished belonging that honors that everyone's safety, dignity and belonging is a moral, ethical and spiritual imperative. In the practice of inner chaplaincy these last two years what has been revealed is my unwavering commitment to social justice, and to the work of supporting chaplains who serve in those realms that support individuals who engage in social change/action, healing or advocacy/activism. I support and come alongside communities and (those that serve these communities) that are impacted by marginalization, othering and systemic injustice. My commitment to social justice ministry is grounded in the moral imperative that all beings deserve safety, dignity and belonging and in my unshakeable faith in the buddha nature of our shared humanity and our sacred connection to the earth. I also stand firmly in the wisdom of experience- that vows to a spiritual path alone cannot create social justice and that those of us who commit to service are always-" engaging in social change-[the work that] asks us to do deep internal work, uprooting and recognizing how social conditions have shaped us through privilege and oppression" (Haines, 2019). This is a heartfelt and vulnerable acknowledgment: throughout my life—whether in the

toxic exclusivity of academia, navigating racist school systems for my children, advocating for proper healthcare for sick and dying family members, or even in the privileged practice spaces of Western Buddhism—I have witnessed how structures of power, and those entrusted to uphold them, routinely decide who is deemed worthy of safety, dignity, and belonging. Having lived and worked within communities that include marginalized and vulnerable identities, I recognize that this reality is shared by many. The broader truth is that systems of power and oppression affect all of us—whether we benefit from them or not, and whether we are consciously aware of their impact or not.More importantly, it is the very fact that we are impacted by systems of power that reify fixed or perceived boundaries of us vs them (Haines 2019, Kyodo Williams et al, 2016, Manuel 2015, Magee 2021, King 2018). And often, it is those whose social identities have been most vulnerable to this perceived separation that point to awakening from the illusion of fixed selves as a central spiritual teaching in our contemporary world (Kyodo Williams et al, 2016, Manuel 2015, Magee 2021, King 2018). Our inner chaplaincy is a space to explore this central teaching- how our own social conditions, identities, and positionalities impact a "fixed self". The objective of this capstone is to examine how the conditions, shaping, and habits of our fixed self may manifest in daily life, recognizing that we are not separate from our service, those we serve, or the contexts in which we serve. In this way, this capstone is not only relevant for chaplains who engage in areas of social justice ministry, but any chaplain who serves individuals and communities within any institution because we cannot escape the reality that systems meter out who deserves our care and that we too, may have internalized these messages. Whether we meet suffering in a prison, in hospice care, or those impacted by climate change, having more skillfulness in meeting our own shaping of self, can help us more authentically meet the suffering of others.

My practice of inner chaplaincy has been an ongoing journey of unlearning, deconstructing, and actively renouncing the habits of a fixed self—both the self that has been projected onto me and the one I have internalized. From study in Buddhist text, the famous well known quote from Dogen says “To study the Buddha way, is to study the self, to study the self, is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things, When actualized by myriad of things, your body and mind as well as the body and mind of others drop away”)we learn that to study the self, is to forget the self (dharma-rain.org). Ruth King teaches that “non-self (anatta) is not that you are not self, it’s a self that you’re not a self you can solidly rely on. The self is constantly changing- a series, of processes, or aggregate experiences. Change is all there is. When we understand this from our practice, we can soften the grip that identity hardens in our heart minds. We can know a deeper freedom, despite conditioning, from inside out” (Vesly-Flad, 2022). Roshi Joan Halifax speaks of the concept of the “small self”, which refers to the limited self-centered perspective of a separate self- identity. She says, “be this boundless reality”. She implores us to move beyond the self that is often driven by fear and ego to access a wider reality that is not confined by our own limitations. These teachings are profound for me. To understand the concept of releasing the ego or perceiving the self as a dynamic series of processes or collective experiences, I have had to cultivate stillness to observe this notion clearly. And when I have, I have needed to understand what it is that I am seeing. I needed a framework to see how my self has been shaped. I have needed to excavate how I have come to see these pieces as *me*. Seeing these pieces is what has allowed a dropping away- a “softening of my grip “of a fixed self. This process of excavation feels crucial to inner chaplaincy and one that we can often bypass in our culture given our reliance on systems that pit

certain identities as better than or worse than others. Western culture often uses identity to navigate systems of dominance, extraction, and superiority. Even more pervasive is the crisis of separation. Systems of oppression convince us that “othering” controls for threat, or loss of power. White supremacy, patriarchy, colonization, are strong systemic paradigms because they continue to maintain the illusion of an other; “us vs them.” Othering “asserts disconnection; and demands domination” and extraction from the whole (Caverly, p.43). Returning to wholeness is challenging when we blindly believe the illusion of separation these paradigms impose. Surfacing our othering habits and remembering our interconnectedness is necessary for our collective liberation. Practicing in this way allows us to better bear witness to and be in choice with how to act. When we are in choice and can embody our agency, we are transforming our relationship to power. The idea of a "fixed self" can contribute to differentiating those who are different from us, creating social structures that result in systemic separation. These constructs can reinforce power dynamics and lead to structural issues. Observing "you vs. me" and "us vs. them" dynamics shows up in our minds/daily life, allows us to explore these deeply embedded psycho-spiritual phenomena in shaping identity.

Experiencing ourselves as separate from our world, is evident not only in the United States, where many of us live, but also on a global scale. How is this crisis impacting you? Inspired by the Sites of Shaping model (Haines, 2019) and my journey with the Three Tenets, this paper offers a contemplative tool to support the excavation/deconstruction of a fixed self. This curriculum offers content, questions, and practices to support self-inquiry and exploration of the conditions shaping us through individual responses. This offering arises from an integration of my own spiritual journey of inner chaplaincy, Zen study and practice and my professional

teaching, learnings and wisdom gathered. It is guided by three central questions that emerged during my reflections:

1. How do my imposed boundaries of "self" reinforce the "us vs. them" divide?
2. How do I release my attachment to the ways the world has treated me?
3. How do I let go of anything that obstructs the intimacy of my life? [1]

Through this process, I aim to support chaplains in cultivating deeper self-awareness, fostering transformation, and dismantling the barriers that hinder authentic connection. To convey a snapshot of this curriculum, I will engage in the process myself, drawing from my own reflections and learnings in this time. I will also draw from the practice of the Three Tenets, the Buddhist framework that consistently guided my journey in this time. Finally, I will offer a response to each of these questions that draw from my own spiritual inquiry.

Importantly, while this journey aims to deepen our capacity for inner work, it is not intended to remain confined to the individual level. As chaplains, we are called to critically examine the effects of both direct and systemic violence in the contexts we serve and to reflect on how our social action can contribute to addressing these issues.

Recognizing that our experiences of separation—and their transformation—occur in relationship with others, reminds us of the interconnected nature of our work. Whether through sangha, community, or broader societal engagement, our practice of examining these dynamics is ultimately about fostering collective liberation. May this offering serve as a guide to deepen our awareness and alignment with this shared purpose. Recognizing our interconnectedness calls us to engage not only in personal transformation but also in the collective work of justice and

[1] These questions were inspired by three key experiences during my chaplaincy study 1) small peer group chaplaincy, 2) Social justice core with Mr. Jarvis Jay Masters and 3) my work with caregivers at the Alzheimer's association and 4) an article from Kaishin Victory Matsui- a priest at the Brooklyn Zen Center.

healing. This understanding naturally leads us to the intersection of spirituality and social action, where Social Justice Ministry and Socially Engaged Buddhism offer pathways for responding to suffering with compassion, awareness, and commitment to change.

Social Justice Ministry and Socially Engaged Buddhism

It is my experience that the world itself has a role to play in our liberation. Its very pressures, pains, and risks can wake us up - release us from the bonds of ego and guide us home to our vast, true nature.
For some of us, our love for the world is so passionate that we cannot ask it to wait until we are enlightened.— Joanna Macy – talk given in the Socially Engaged Buddhism Class- A Wiser, Braver World -Awakened Action, August 19, 2020

Social justice ministry involves and socially engaged Buddhism, involve accompanying the suffering of individuals and communities who face moral suffering due to systemic inequality, oppression, and injustice. This approach recognizes the importance of both inner transformation and outward action in creating a more just and equitable society (Fernandez, 2020).

Social Justice Ministry emphasizes the role of faith communities in advocating for justice, equity, and human rights. It involves not only providing spiritual support but also actively working to dismantle structures of systemic oppression (e.g., racism, poverty, gender inequality). Social justice ministry often includes direct service, education, advocacy, and public

witness to promote social change in line with religious or ethical principles of compassion, dignity, and justice (Fernandez, 2020).

Socially Engaged Buddhism, is a concept that emerged prominently in the late 20th century as a result of Buddhism meeting the inequities of the globalized world (Fernandez, 2020). Teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy, Roshi Bernie Glassman, Roshi Joan Halifax emphasized responding to suffering in the world with compassion and action. To be a socially engaged chaplain requires that one integrates Buddhist values of non-harming and interconnection with efforts to accompany others and transform the suffering caused by social injustices.

A socially engaged chaplain tends to suffering across multiple spheres—both individual and collective—while also grappling internally with the profound impact of injustice.
In summary, social justice ministry and socially engaged Buddhism are about blending spiritual practice with social action- working toward healing, transformation, and justice on both individual and systemic levels. In both fields, chaplains are asked to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of social movements and help guide individuals and communities through the challenges of resistance, building collective strength, and fostering solidarity. Both Social Justice Ministry and Socially Engaged Buddhism recognize that suffering is not only personal but also deeply embedded in societal structures. As chaplains engage in this work, they inevitably encounter moral outrage and moral suffering—the internal and collective turmoil that arises in the face of injustice. Understanding and addressing these emotional and ethical struggles is essential to sustaining the path of justice and compassion.

Moral suffering, Burnout and Disrespect: Edge States in Social Justice Work

Integrity and Moral Suffering

Integrity involves acting in accordance with one's values and principles, guided by wisdom, while moral suffering arises when our actions—or those of others—conflict with these core values and our sense of fundamental goodness (Halifax, 2018). Moral suffering includes moral injury, moral outrage, and moral apathy. Moral injury is a psychological wound from witnessing or participating in a morally wrong act, which can lead to shame and guilt. Moral outrage is defined as the anger directed towards individuals who transgress social norms. Conversely, moral apathy is characterized by a lack of concern or the dismissal of harmful situations.

Respect and Disrespect

Respect for others and all beings strengthens our capacity for empathy and integrity, both essential for building community, fostering safety and trust, and honoring personal boundaries (Halifax, 2018). True respect encompasses three key aspects: respect for others, respect for principles and values, and self-respect.

Disrespect arises when we engage in power-over dynamics, prioritize our own beliefs and values above others, or experience consistent marginalization within our cultural or social contexts. It manifests through indignity, exclusion, and the erosion of mutual regard.

Engagement and Burnout

Engagement reflects how we approach our work and commitments—with purpose, presence, and dedication to service as a means of enriching both our own lives and the lives of others. Genuine engagement sustains and nourishes us (Halifax, 2018).

Burnout, on the other hand, sets in when we lose the intention to meet our work with wholeheartedness. It emerges when busyness becomes an unconscious coping

mechanism—an attempt to seek validation, maintain visibility, or chase fleeting bursts of energy at the expense of true fulfillment.

In my chaplaincy practice, I have supported those building organizational movement towards racial equity, healing, and collective justice. I think often of what it means to serve from a place that embodies dignity, respect, integrity, empathy, and whole-hearted engagement. Many in the social justice sphere, including myself, face moral injury, outrage, burnout, and disrespect. These personal struggles are influenced by broader systems, extending moral suffering, burnout, and disrespect from individuals to society collectively.

I often think of these questions I heard Roshi Joan ask when speaking of edge states: Who am I in my work/system? What do I stand for? How do I honor my limits and the limits of what can realistically be asked of the system? When is it time for me to remove myself from a situation that is harmful to me and others, and when is it time to find leverage within the system? How can I hold the practice of not knowing, bearing witness, and compassionate action while integrating my awareness of edge states? I recall also that true compassionate action cannot be planned or prescribed. Roshi Joan quotes Marina Abramovic: “On the edge, we’re really in the present moment. Because we know we might fall.” (Halifax, 2018, p.92). Roshi says, “When we are standing at the edge, we cannot turn away from our suffering in our inner or outer lives.” (p.92).

I am also reminded of a recent facilitation I co-led for an all-Black Leadership retreat—the first of its kind in the 34-year history of the company—for a global energy corporation with over 30,000 employees. Though my role as a facilitator was to bear witness to the group’s stories and create an opportunity to build connection, I was excited when the group declared how much they needed a space like this. The room was filled with wisdom,

success, and celebration, as well as grief, resentment, burden, anger, and apathy. Some had been holding so much for so long without ever really sharing it.

Some felt that coming together in this space meant focusing only on the joys and gratitude of achieving leadership roles; others had never shared what it was like to be the "only" in some spaces, and others wanted to organize and mobilize. We practiced many pauses, took breaths, and felt our feet on the ground. Tears were shed (and eventually encouraged), and a collective effort to support each other was authentically generated.

After returning to their workspaces, the group felt that an intentionally designed Black space would be threatening to the company and could put other Black employees who were not in leadership at risk for future promotion—or worse, job loss. I was deeply disappointed. Maybe to walk alongside others cannot include an expectation of an outcome—only a willingness to return to not knowing, bearing witness and compassionate action. Ultimately, this experience deepened my understanding of the complexities of systemic injustice and the vulnerability that comes with challenging the status quo. It also reinforced the importance of approaching this work without attachment to specific outcomes, but rather with a commitment to presence, reflection, and action through practice with the Three Tenets.

The Three Tenets (holding the Three Tenets through our process)

Practicing with the Three Tenets has been transformative in both inner and outer chaplaincy. It is a practice I return to often and is the inspiration for challenging the idea of a fixed self. I turn the Three Tenets onto myself. The Three Tenets are:

1. Not knowing (letting go of fixed ideas)

2. Bearing witness

3. Loving (compassionate) action- taking action grounded from the experience of not knowing and bearing witness

An important foundation for studying and framing our work with the Three Tenets is the *Supplication for Raising the Bodhi Mind* from the *Gate of Sweet Nectar Ceremony* at Upaya. This prayer invites us to raise the mind of enlightenment:

Raising the Bodhi Mind, the supreme meal is offered to all the hungry spirits throughout space and time, filling the smallest particle to the largest space. All you hungry spirits in the ten directions, please gather here. Sharing your distress, I offer you this food, hoping it will resolve your thirst and hunger.

All you hungry spirits in the ten directions, please gather here. Sharing your distress, I offer you this food, hoping it will resolve your thirsts and hunger.″

This invocation is a big teaching for me because it reminds me that we, too, are the hungry spirits. We are also the Supreme Meal, feeding everyone through our wholesome presence, the very thing the Three Tenets invites us back to. This profound truth leads to the question: *What must we let go of to feed everyone, to offer ourselves fully as the supreme meal?*

Rather than focus on the letting go, what inspires me is the raising of the Bodhi Mind—the mind of enlightenment—realizing that we are all one body, interconnected and interdependent. Whatever supports this realization is what allows us to become the supreme meal. Our practice is to arouse the wisdom of interdependence and eliminate separation. An analogy taught by Roshi

Eve Marko in one of our core training courses illustrates this: If your thumb is injured, you do not ignore it simply because the rest of your body is fine. Instead, you care for it as part of the whole. In my experience, systemic oppression has been my thumb. But my "systemic oppression" is not all of me. The raising of the Bodhi mind asks us to tend to each part of the interconnected whole. Dogen says, *"Turn the light inward to illuminate yourself; then return."* When we turn inward, we encounter pure awareness—our true nature. This pure awareness is the foundation of our zazen practice, the space we cultivate and return to in praxis through the Three Tenets. By coming back to the "sound of no sound"—the stillness and depth of our true nature—we raise Bodhi Mind. I am more than my systemic oppression and so is the world; this is my awareness- the stillness, the "sound of no sound", I can rest into.

The Three Tenets—Not Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Loving Action—serve as a foundational guide for our chaplaincy work, helping us navigate both inner and outer transformation. They remind us that true engagement requires a willingness to release fixed ideas- including the idea of a fixed self, stay present with suffering, and respond with compassionate action. This practice is deeply intertwined with raising the Bodhi Mind, recognizing our shared interdependence, and asking what we must let go of to fully serve as the supreme meal—nourishing ourselves and others through presence and awareness. In this way, the practice of letting go not only fosters deeper presence and awareness but also prepares us to engage with the wisdom held within our bodies. Somatics offers a vital pathway for this work, recognizing that transformation is not just a matter of the mind, but an embodied process shaped by our personal and collective histories.

Somatics provides a complementary framework by acknowledging how our bodies, shaped by social and historical conditions, hold both resilience and trauma. It teaches us that

healing and transformation are not solely intellectual but lived and embodied experiences. The Sites of Shaping/Sites of Change model further deepens this understanding by exploring how safety, belonging, and dignity are cultivated—or denied—within social structures. Through the integration of the Three Tenets and somatic awareness, we begin to excavate the ways in which systemic oppression, personal narratives, and embodied histories influence our work. As we hold questions about self-imposed boundaries, attachment to suffering, and the barriers to intimacy, we are invited to return to the Three Tenets—turning inward, bearing witness to what arises, and responding with wisdom and compassion. This ongoing practice asks us to reflect: *What is illuminated for us as we engage in this process? How does embodying these teachings transform not only our understanding but our very way of being in the world?*

Somatics- A wholistic methodology to know how we come to know.

Haines (2019) explains, "Somatics understands both the individual and collective as a combination of biological, evolutionary, emotional, and psychological aspects, shaped by social and historical norms, and adaptive to a wide array of both resilient and oppressive forces" (p. 19). The practice of somatics supports transformational change and fosters both individual and collective growth. It prioritizes connection and integration over compartmentalization and intellectualization, emphasizing a body/mind/heart/spirit approach to healing and adaptation. At its core, somatic work recognizes that our social conditions profoundly influence how we relate to the world, power dynamics, and one another. These conditions also shape how we respond to change, trauma and oppression, how we heal, and how we cultivate the capacity for more sustainable, generative, and relational ways of being.

Sites of Shaping, Sites of Change (Safety, Belonging, Dignity)

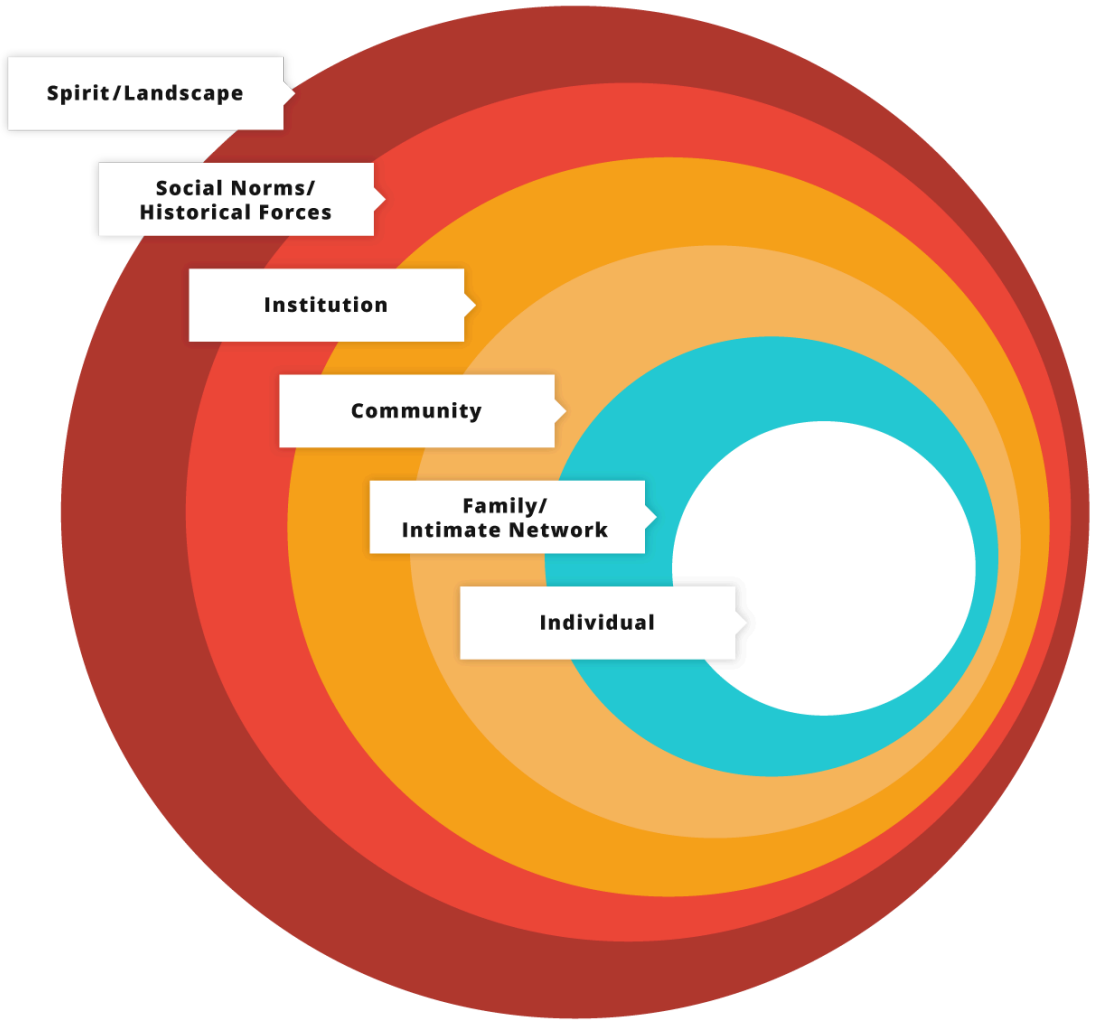
I was introduced to the *Sites of Shaping, Sites of Change* model through Staci Haines, co-founder of Generative Somatics, a multiracial social justice organization that integrates somatic practices into social and environmental justice movements. Staci is also the founder of generation FIVE, an organization dedicated to ending the sexual abuse of children within five generations (Haines, 2019).

The *Sites of Shaping* framework, developed by Alan Greig and Generation FIVE, applies a public health approach to examine the multifaceted layers of sexual abuse—its causes, impacts, and prevention strategies. This framework challenges traditional assumptions about offenders, emphasizing that "offenders aren't born; they are built." At its core lies a critical guiding question: *How are our social conditions shaping and building offenders?* (Haines, 2019, p. 47). For the purpose of challenging the notion of a fixed self, this question can be reframed to ask: *How are our social conditions shaping and building my concept of self?* This reimagining invites us to explore how systemic and social factors influence the ways we become fixated on particular identities, narratives, and roles. It examines how social conditions maintain separation and marginalization for some, while highlighting others, revealing hidden dynamics. By reframing this inquiry toward the shaping of self, we begin to see how our identities and behaviors are not fixed but constructed through social conditions. This realization calls us to engage in both inner and outer work, recognizing that meaningful transformation requires us to examine not only societal structures but also our own unconscious patterns.

Sites of Shaping Model

The image in Figure 1 represents the Sites of Shaping framework, illustrating the interconnected layers that influence individual and collective development. At the center is the individual, surrounded by expanding rings that represent key social structures, including family/intimate networks, community, institutions, social norms/historical forces, and the broader spiritual or environmental landscape. Each layer reflects the ways in which personal identity, behaviors, and worldviews are shaped by broader societal forces. This model highlights how transformation must occur at multiple levels, acknowledging that personal healing and social change are deeply intertwined. To illustrate how a chaplain might work with this model, I will provide my own responses as a reflection. Let's begin.

Figure 1: Sites of Shaping



Generative Somatics. Diagram designs: Querido Galdo. www.queridomundo.com

The upcoming section will present each shaping site and illustrate how these sites are manifested through my responses to various levels of inquiry accompanying each site.

Individual.

Our individual site of shaping refers to our composition, our temperament, our inherent character to which we were born. For example, children born to the same parents, raised in the same family, will express variation in their ways of being in the world given their individual shaping. There are many theories as to why this occurs; the why is not so important to somatics. **What is meaningful in touching into the *what*- what is your makeup? Some questions to consider: What do you feel is your constitution/make-up? What did you come with?**

I am calm, grounded, and introspective and warm disposition. As a child, I was sensitive and observant to how others moved in the world. It was of interest to me, others' feelings, ways of being, and especially others' suffering. I felt drawn to understanding people's suffering and a desire to listen or be with them. I always had a strong sense of intuition and have made an effort to stay true to it, even when it was different from others, including my own family members.

Families and Intimate Networks.

We might think of this site of shaping as the people closest to us which we belong to; those whom we have formed bonds with (whether healthy or not), in our childhood and adult lives. In Western psychology and other emotional healing modalities, this is the site most often worked with for therapeutic needs. Included in those "we belong to" are those we are biologically related to, as well as communities we are bonded to due to circumstance and/or choice. Some questions to consider: **How have your experiences of family shaped you? In your younger development? Now? What did you learn about safety, belonging and dignity? About resources? About equity? How were the larger social norms taught to you through your family and intimate networks?**

I am a daughter of Dominican immigrants. Most of my parents' siblings remained in the Dominican Republic except for one of my maternal aunts, whom I was very close to. My parents' social network was my maternal aunt and a circle of older second and third cousins that lived in a predominantly Dominican neighborhood we visited mostly on weekends. They also relied on our neighbors and those in our community, people who were also immigrants from many different places such as Lebanon, Guyana, Peru, gay men (we grew up in Chelsea, NYC), Jewish folks and white working-class families. Family was not about biology, but about the giving and receiving of resources, including time and energy to make sure everyone had what they needed because there was little biological family around to rely on. My parents were very generous with their resources, though we did not have a lot- the four of us (I am an identical twin) lived in a one-bedroom apartment. It was enough until I became a teenager. When I went off to college, I never went back to live at home. Serving others was something I learned from my parents and community, and the work I engaged in after college did not pay well for someone who was paying rent and sustaining herself. I struggled economically for a time, until I met my husband to be, who was also, a son of immigrants and trying to live with more financial stability. We shared resources, got married and have built a sustainable life. Everything we have and own, we have worked for ourselves, except for the house we live in. My Korean in-laws bought our home in 1980 and paid off the mortgage. After their death, our home has housed our children, my sister and my nephew and my father, who still lives with us. We have also been able to help friends who have needed financial help throughout the years, including our neighbors. We know equity is not a given for people whose lived experiences are similar to ours. Though my parents were educated- my father a doctor and my mother a university professor, my parents gave up

many of their resources when they came to the US after the Trujillo dictatorship. They often expressed disillusion at the level of racism they experienced in work and everyday life. My in-laws had less than a high school and worked factory jobs six to seven days a week. They sacrificed much of their time for their son to have what he needed in terms of basic needs, including education. Many of the those I grew up with or found myself in space with share similar stories. Sacrifice stands out as a method to obtain safety, belonging and dignity.

Community.

Community can represent a region or place (i.e. Downtown New York City). One's community can also be a racial or cultural identity, groups organized around gender or sexual orientation and groups connected by a particular practice "(martial arts, sports, meditation"., p.49. These communities are often structured around institutions and/or dictated by regional and/or cultural customs. Some questions to consider: **Who are your communities? How have they shaped you? How have others been shaped by those communities? How does your community position itself toward communities that are different from yours culturally, racially or economically?**

I was born and raised in NYC and have a lot of pride in this identity. I lived in Chelsea, attended elementary school in the Village, and high school in the Lower East Side. I walked everywhere and traveled on the bus or subway as early as eleven years -old, usually with other kids. My neighborhood consisted of various immigrant groups, working class and small business owners, queer, Jewish, Irish and Black folks that mostly lived in public housing. I attended Catholic schools, including a Jesuit College but my parents and our community were politically

progressive. The public parks, empty parking lots, the highways by the water, museums, the library, bookstores and cafes, the opera and ballet and restaurants were my playing fields as a child. As an adult, I currently live in Sunnyside, Queens in a multi-family house with a backyard, and very similar to the neighborhood I grew up in. I have lived in and worked in every borough except Staten Island. Living with and interacting with people who are different from me is very natural to me; monolithic communities are peculiar to me. I am of mixed ancestry, Dominican and racially identify as Black, middle class and well-educated. Having grown up and lived in immigrant communities and those marginalized by race and class, education was seen as a tool for upward mobility and many in my circles are PhD, engineers. lawyers, business leaders and economically successful. Financial stability has also allowed me to become active in social justice campaigns, especially those that ensure access and opportunity to resources such as education, which have opened up the pathway to being involved in other social justice causes. My life is not separate from the people, the spaces or the causes I am politically engaged in. I have also traveled and lived abroad and spent much of my childhood traveling to my mother's hometown in the Dominican Republic. I am also married to a Korean born, raised by Korean immigrants, man. Though he arrived in the US at a very young age, we are both accustomed to thinking transnationally, globally and not centering the United States or American as an identity.

Institutions

Institutions refer to the larger systems that impact people and communities. We can include private/public education, financial institutions, hospitals/healthcare, religious institutions, criminal/legal institutions, military, technological and communications institutions (i.e. media), government, agriculture and social services. In our current society, institutions are designed in a

power-over structure. The economic system of global capitalism drives much of the sustainability of these institutions, which thrive on the exploitation and labor of others, "including the earth", to build wealth for a few (p.50). Some questions to consider: **Reflect on two institutions that have shaped you and others you care about. How have these shaped your ideas, actions and relationships? What have you gained through this institution? How has this institution harmed you, those you care about and others? Which of these institutions can cause trauma and to whom? Which of these perpetuate oppression? How do these institutions orient to the natural environment and sustainability?**

My earliest recollection of racism happened in a school setting. My best friend's aunt, also my seventh-grade teacher, forbade my friend from playing with the "dirty Puerto Rican twins". Although I knew I was different, it was the first time I personally experienced that in school settings. I learned that racial differences were a way to classify aptitude, ability, intelligence, worth, safety, dignity and belonging. I struggled with this through my entire academic career, including when I became a tenured professor and Chair. It is no coincidence that I worked for twenty years in a department and program whose mission was to provide access and opportunity to marginalized students who would not be accepted at other institutions of higher education. I have written extensively on this experience (Son, 2013, Son et al 2022, Son, 2024 and forthcoming Son 2025). In addition, my father, who had been educated and licensed to practice medicine in the Dominican Republic, had to pass his English exam, and go back to medical school, including doing a new residency when he came to the United States. I was nineteen years old when he finally began to work as a doctor. Though I have gained highly skilled training from my many years of school which have positioned me to become more economically stable than

my parents; the irony is that my parents were already educated. They just did not fit into what was considered to be "educated" here in the United States- heavy accents, degrees from a developing country and non-white Latinos. I have always been very keen on this knowing, even if we never discussed it at home.

Social Norms and Historical Forces

Social Norms are what Haines refers to as the "rules of engagement", the definitions of the reality of the world we live in (p.51). Who and what are considered valuable, normal, worthy of dignity and respect? Social norms also consist of the collective stories that inform us of whose stories, experiences and lives are considered valuable, normal and worthy of dignity and respect. Historical forces are the historical events that still impact and define social norms even after they have long passed. Haines cites "chattel slavery and Jim Crow, World War II, the reservation system for indigenous peoples as some examples. Some questions to consider are: **What did you learn that was normal and not normal? What is the grounding for that? Who did you learn "naturally "deserves more safety, belonging, dignity and resources? Who has more inherent worth? Who is more disposable? Who are you or any "group" assumed to be? What relationships to the earth and nature did you learn? To money and the economy?**

I think a lot about race, gender and class when I reflect on social norms. Perhaps it is because of my female gender and the direct and indirect messages of who I was told I should be. As a woman, to have a career, a husband and family was a marker of success and worth- that one was "good", deserving of love and recognition, that one was valuable. As that woman, I also learned that I needed to look beautiful be presentable to the world (wear the right clothes to be taken

seriously and be seen as intelligent and not appear as weak or vulnerable if I insisted on having a career. Each of these lessons were even more important for me when I found out I was a racially light-skinned Dominican Black woman daughter of immigrants. I think I was 12 years old, and I had to renegotiate my whole world. It made me realize in this society I had so much going against me that I needed to work harder to ensure that no one would question whether or not I deserved to keep all that I was achieving. I could really lose it all anyway, but especially if I messed up. Moreover, my messing things up, would also be messing up opportunities for other women like me. Though I do not agree with these norms, other observations around social norms I was keen on in my own development are:

- People who work hard deserve what they have.
- People who are smart, attractive and well- presented, are more likely to be given opportunities.
- People of color, poor folks, elderly folks, disabled folks, folks with mental health issues or chronic illness are disposable.
- People who fail (in school, at relationships or other tasks our society assigns as markers of success, do not fit in
- Perfection is preferred rather than making mistakes (especially if you come from categories that make you disposable)

With regards to historical forces, I grew up with parents who survived and escaped the aftermath of the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic (1930–1961). (Torres Saillant, 2000). Other than two or three graphic stories of what they witnessed during this time, my parents did not share much of whatever suffering they were carrying. However, the dimensions

of those experiences were very much alive in the extended Dominican community I was a part of. For example, the political trauma and psychological impact of living in oppression and fear had a toll**.** Many Dominicans who fled Trujillo's regime were escaping a climate of extreme political repression, violence, and fear. Trujillo's secret police targeted dissenters, and fleeing the country often meant leaving loved ones behind, sometimes without closure. Others who emigrated experienced survivor's guilt because they knew of loved ones and others who were unable to leave or were killed. Trauma from witnessing or experiencing political violence, exile, and the loss of home, also left many with deep psychological scars. In addition, the cultural adaptation to living in the United States was challenging, as is for many immigrants, including the political climate that receives them. Some of these experiences unique to being an immigrant are 1) adjusting to a predominantly English-speaking society, especially those from rural areas or with limited formal education, 2) culturally adjusting or assimilating into U.S. culture often meant navigating unfamiliar social norms, values, and racial dynamics (especially for Afro-Dominicans and other immigrants categorized as Black and 3) being continuously marginalized- many immigrants (i.e. Dominican refugees,) settled in immigrant communities, facing discrimination both as immigrants and, in some cases, as people of color (Son, 2013). Though I grew up in a city of immigrants, siloing of communities was always very palpable as the White and wealthy generally lived in better resourced parts of the city. All of these things became even more charged after the 9/11 attacks to the World Trade Center, when much of the trepidation about immigrants turned towards Muslims.

Spirit and Landscape

Spirit and Landscape make up the largest part of the circle in the Sites of Shaping model as well as the final site. This configuration is due to the wisdom that these forces are beyond our human understanding and human capacity to control. These sites have been here before us and will exist after we are gone. The land we reside on, lives deeply in our senses and our bodies; "it shapes our thinking and our boundaries" (p.52). Our connection to landscapes, whether forest, or mountains, rivers and oceans, or city parks, has been cited to support human resilience, a sense of hope, peace, calm and awe that support positive well-being. Some questions to consider: **How has landscape shaped you? How does it live in you? How has it shaped your communities? How has a connection to the vastness and unknown shaped you? What are your experiences with this mystery that are not interpreted through social norms? Do you find resilience in landscape or spirit? Does your community?**

The connection to spirit was something that called me at a young age. It was not so much a belief in a "God" that I had, but what I witnessed -the sincere goodness- the desire to serve and help others, first in my parents and my aunt, who gave generously of their resources, including time and energy to help their family members and community. In addition, those they surrounded themselves with – neighbors, friends, co-workers, were also genuinely people who were kind and cared for the well-being of others and the world. There were no clergy, priests or dharma teachers in my immediate context that modeled these behaviors, only regular, average human beings. For this reason, I always feel hopeful of the loving capacity of the human heart.

In terms of landscapes, I have always loved plants and gardens. In our tiny apartment, my mother kept a large corner for all her indoor plants. When we traveled back to the Dominican Republic in the summers, my family had mango trees, lime trees, avocado trees, aloe plants, I

can still smell and feel the coconut and palm trees by the beach, taste the saltiness of the ocean, shiver at the coldness of the rivers waters and recall seeing the tops of green valleys in the central mountainside. These images and sensations somehow became tucked away, a part of me as I returned to urban life. I attended university right across from the Botanical Gardens in the Bronx, a place that always brings great peace, joy and healing. Finally, I recently discovered that one of my favorite landscapes is the Southwest. The colors and the vastness of the desert, the mountains and rock formations, the smells of sage and juniper and the history of both Spanish and indigenous people – both of which I also share ancestry with, seem very familiar to my body and spirit. There is no landscape I can call home; it is the element of life and the loving capacity of the human heart, which can be found anywhere and everywhere that connects me to spirit. Above, I have shared personal examples to illustrate our shaping. These serve as a starting point for investigating shaping sites. This is a lifelong practice, growing more complex as you become skilled at noticing the nuances of your shaping and how each site interacts. Transformative change requires engaging with these edges mindfully and conscientiously. Practicing in this way, from our chaplain orientation, allows for a socially engaged Buddhist perspective to emerge as we aspire to fulfill our vow to liberate all beings.

Having explored the ways in which shaping influences our lives, we now turn to a guided reflection to deepen our inquiry. These questions invite us to examine not only our personal experiences but also the broader systems and narratives that shape our collective realities, challenging us to engage with them from a place of awareness and transformation.

Guided Reflection

Take a few deep grounded breaths, standing or sitting, feeling your feet on the ground. Return to our core questions again:

- How do my imposed boundaries of "self" reinforce the "us vs. them" divide?
- How do I release my attachment to the ways the world has treated me?
- How do I let go of anything that obstructs the intimacy of my life?
- *What must we let go of to feed everyone, to offer ourselves fully as the supreme meal?*

As you settle into this reflection, allow these questions to guide your awareness inward, inviting you to notice the patterns, emotions, and sensations that arise in response.

What is the story that is taking shape for you? What patterns do you see? What feelings/sensations/emotions are you touching into?

To further tone the “muscle” of our excavation, ALSO consider the following questions provided from Haines. (Haines, 2019, p. 60):

- Who is systemically offered safety belonging dignity and resources whom is it taken from to do this?
- Who is systemically denied safety belonging dignity and resources and then blamed for it?
- Who benefits from this system/policy /norm/war? Which people, communities and nations benefit?
- Who suffers from the system who pays with their health labor and lives?

- Who decides, who defines reality, the dominant narrative history possibility?
- Which peoples and what natural resources are exploited to concentrate wealth power and decision making in the view?
- Who is poor and who is wealthy? Which people? Which countries? How is this perpetuated? Who does this serve?
- How are the poor, the exploited, and the victimized described by or blamed in the dominant narrative?

Building on these inquiries, let us now turn inward and reflect on how these systemic forces shape our own actions, beliefs, and commitments in everyday life.

Journal Reflection (adapted from Haines, p.61, 2019)

- What does it take for you to transform from power- over social conditions that have been embodied in you- even when they are not what you believe in?
- Even when you're thinking may have shifted, have your actions changed- has how you spent your life/ time/ resources changed to align with these values?
- What does it take for you to work collectively or in the community, when there has been so much wounding among difference? When under pressure how do you tend to polarize and make others wrong?
- As a chaplain, have you joined organizations that actively engage in social justice? If not, why not?

- If you work in social justice ministry, have you integrated an understanding of trauma and healing into your ministry? Have you accessed healing and transformation for yourself and your organization?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey of inner chaplaincy is a profound and transformative process that challenges the notion of a fixed self. By engaging in self-inquiry and exploring the conditions that shape us, we can cultivate deeper self-awareness and foster transformation. This capstone has highlighted the importance of recognizing our interconnectedness and the impact of social conditions on our identities and behaviors. Through the integration of the Three Tenets and somatic awareness, we are invited to turn inward, bear witness to our experiences, and respond with compassionate action. This ongoing practice not only supports personal healing but also contributes to the collective work of justice and healing. As chaplains, we are called to critically examine the effects of systemic violence and reflect on how our social action can address these issues. Ultimately, this journey is about fostering collective liberation and aligning our spiritual practice with social action to create a more just and equitable society.

Appendix 1

1. **How do my imposed boundaries of "self", reify us vs them? Investigating what has shaped me.**

How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft front compassion, moving past fear into a place of genuine tenderness? I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly — and letting the world see into us. —Roshi Joan Halifax

"*I hold in my body the seed of the colonizer; to reject my own body, my own desires and dreams, my own truths. I too, have hated and othered those whom, I fear. Yet fear is a destructive and immobilizing state. The only thing possible in fear, is the actualization of more terror and a deluded sense of control- that somehow I knew what the outcome of speaking my truth would be- There is trepidation in my body- clenching in my hips. Contraction in my throat, core and chest. I know this- waves of grief- fire of rage. My own powerlessness-can I be me? I have been harmed by those like them- white women. Was I willing to face being naked and exposed again? I have goosebumps- they tell me something else… is here? What else is here? For me? For them? Something in my chest begins to soften. And I am not sure I could walk in the world, in a snot-nosed, teary-eyed, pissed off, "I'm coming for you" disarray*? Can I be me? Can I **be?-** Monika Son

Ruth King:" In Buddhist Teachings, non-self (anatta) is not that you are not self, it's a self that you're not a self you can solidly rely on. The self is constantly changing- a series, of processes, or aggregate experiences. Change is all there is. When we understand this from our practice, we can soften the grip that identity hardens in our heart minds. We can know deeper freedom, despite conditioning, from inside out." (Vesly Flad, p, 176.)

2.How do I get out of this attachment of how the world has treated me?

"*Returning to Mr. Master's question, I can now perhaps offer a response. I will be othered, targeted and marginalized; I do not pretend the world will always embrace me as I am. I won't let go of this truth; it holds a collective mirror for so many. And I trust the self that I have come to know through Zen. I trust that when I experience this body as a site of authority, courage, multiplicity, and compassion to meet myself right here where I am, - to meet the other as they are, I wield the power to transform my conditions. I choose to cultivate and imagine a world where power is to do no harm. I renounce that which has tried to separate, cage and erase me,*

and that in me that wishes to do the same to somebody else-I forgive myself and those who have harmed me and I remember that home is where we can all experience freedom: in this whole body, this whole world." (Son forthcoming)

3.How do I let go of anything that comes between me and the intimacy of my life?

I meet the hungry ghost. Integrating it all – recalling my vows and working with the 3 tenets.
-Monika Son-Core reflection paper on the Three Tenets

"It struck me that I will likely never be fully atoned, because I am also the hungry ghost. And I didn't want to be a hungry ghost" Core Reflection paper on the Three Tenets.

"Sometimes we are impeded from seeing the truth of who we are. Life is about removing the blindfold"- Father Greg Boyle

Supplication of raising the Boddhi Mind.
"I had a deep fear of remaining invisible, stagnant, of no one ever knowing who I was or what I could achieve." Son- Sitting Zazen: Revealing Healing, Wholeness and Power in Contemplative Practices and Acts of Resistance in Higher Education

4.What must we let go of to feed everyone, to offer ourselves fully as the supreme meal?

Roshi Rev angel Kyodo williams: "and if you find yourself not wanting someone to be free- go work on yourself- don't figure out how you can fix them, contain them control them- figure out what it is you are holding on to. Let's put our energy and effort into expressing the full and complete dharma that is-at this moment such an offering to the world. To help us understand the desperately needed truth of our interconnectedness- our interbeing. Our oneness. And that that oneness expresses itself- in a myriad of ways -the ten thousand things and that we should love and liberate each and every one of them".

Appendix 2

Renunciation is letting go of anything that comes between you and the intimacy of life. - Kaishin Victory Matsui- Brooklyn Zen Center

“But if you want to say that you’re committed to the dharma. If you want to say that you are committed to liberation- you have to let everyone in because at this time we don’t have the luxury of liberation for the sake of liberation. At this time, liberation for the sake of all beings is the only liberation that is worthy of who we are. Not liberation for those people that look like us, talk like us… not liberation for the people that makes us comfortable and feel at ease. Not liberation for the sake of people that do not upset our view. Even of Buddhism itself. Liberation for all beings. En punto.” Roshi Rev Angel Kyodo Williams

I have always tried to work for a cause, the cause to
me is bigger than any organization. Bigger
than any group of people, and it is the cause of
humanity. The cause is the cause that brings
us together, the drive of the human spirit for
freedom." Ella Baker

If we are not fixed on ourselves, we don’t have one to defend.- Roshi Rev Angel Kyodo Williams

Our collective stories are the sites of critical consciousness, - (Student in Knowledge & Power course).

I know what they are thinking- she is talking about black women, again?!!!. But we are never represented as who we really are. We all need to be seen for who we really are. - (Student in Knowledge & Power course)

When we bear witness, when we do not avert our gaze; something is revealed.- Roshi Joan Halifax- Fall, November Core Session, 2024

(Indigenous peoples) Indians think it is important to remember, while Americans believe it is important to forget. America has amnesia… Certainly, there is a passion for memory loss in American thought… Americans may be the world champion forgetters. -Paula Gunn Allen "Who is Your Mother?"- The Red Roots of White Feminism

How do we imagine a circle of compassion and imagine no one is outside that circle? We find our way to the margins. – Father Greg Boyle, personal communication

When you find the place where you are, practice occurs.- Dogen

We are deeply entangled in the very systems we are organizing to change. White supremacy, misogyny, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia exist everywhere, we have all so

thoroughly internalized the logistics of oppression that is if oppression were to end tomorrow, we would likely reproduce previous structures – Mariame Kaba (2010)

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