

Alumnus serves as first WI National Guard Buddhist chaplain

by Alyssa Kadansky - Thursday, December 05, 2013

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/30644/alumnus-serves-as-first-wi-national-guard-buddhist-chaplain/>

It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then the victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or by demons, heaven or hell. -- Buddha

With the guidance of the Buddhist scriptural texts, a degree in religious studies and loyalty to his country, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh alumnus Christopher Mohr '04, of Appleton, has combined his passions into a career as the first Buddhist chaplain in the Wisconsin National Guard.

Throughout his life, Mohr had a tendency to lean toward Buddhism in his spiritual beliefs, but he did not have a community to practice with or the proper resources. When he came to UW Oshkosh, however, that all changed.

Mohr discovered the resources and the educational opportunities that the religious studies and anthropology department had to offer him, delving into classes with professors Kathleen Corley and Jeffrey Kaplan.

“Some of my best classes, in fact, most of my best classes came out of religious studies,” Mohr said. “The faculty was and ... still is phenomenal.”

While pursuing his religious studies degree, Mohr spent a year abroad in Japan to further his understanding of Buddhism and to learn more about Buddhist practices that he could not experience in the classroom. This trip, Mohr said, was extremely important to shaping his own beliefs.

“I got to see things in practice that I had only read about and did not really grasp,” Mohr said. “It really solidified that this is what reality is. Reality is not found in a textbook, not found in some kind of strange theory.... Practice is totally separate and practice is more important.”

Mohr went on to complete a 72-credit program and receive his master's in divinity from the University of the West in Rosemead, Calif., in 2012. He was then ordained through the International Order of Buddhist Ministers under Bhante Chao Chu, the abbot of the Rosemead Buddhist Monastery.

His inspiration to join the Wisconsin National Guard came out of a conversation at a career fair with National Guard recruiters who asked if he had ever considered becoming a chaplain.

The seed was planted and Mohr went on to become a chaplain candidate and complete a 12-week training course in Fort Jackson, S.C. In July 2013, Mohr was inducted as the first Buddhist chaplain in the Wisconsin National Guard.

As a chaplain, Mohr is responsible for ministering to and helping not only Buddhists, but also soldiers who come from different religious backgrounds. Mohr believes that his educational experience at UWO

has helped him work with people who have different beliefs.

“Getting a degree in religious studies really provided a very broad and dynamic structural basis for me to be able to minister to people of different religions,” Mohr said.

Mohr believes that the most important part of his job is helping soldiers on their own religious terms and giving them all the guidance that they deserve.

“My personal focus is more on equanimity than on anything, so working with people without setting them aside as different or separate or treating different people in a different way,” Mohr said.

Questions often arise regarding the popular notion of Buddhist non-violence and how that notion can find a place in the military. Mohr believes incorporating Buddhist tenets into the military is actually very simple.

“Most people believe Buddhism to be this ultra-passive kind of thing,” Mohr said. “It never has been and it never will be. In fact, some of the earliest scriptural works, some of the earliest writings, describe the ideal monk in terms of the ideal warrior.”

This warrior philosophy paired with a soldier’s intention to protect makes Buddhism an integral part of the military. Mohr believes intentional action is key, and that getting in and out of a combat zone with the intention of protecting the innocent is a crucial Buddhist belief and vital for the military.

“We’re making sure that these people who had nothing to do with this aren’t getting hurt in the process,” Mohr said.

While soldiers are constantly being deployed and engaging in combat overseas, Mohr realizes that they are often experiencing internal turmoil and stress due to war. He employs Buddhist teachings to soldiers here in Wisconsin, whether they are Buddhists, Christians, Jews or Muslims.

Mohr’s role is to provide soldiers with not just a religious counselor, but a “ritual container,” or someone who will listen to them and who will take on their stress and effectively channel it when the soldier is feeling overwhelmed.

“Essentially, it comes down to when people are broken, when people are going through extreme turmoil, extreme stress, they need someone who can be a ritual container to be able to deal with it properly so that the stress and everything that’s going on isn’t just randomly floating around,” Mohr said. “They need somebody who will be able to contain that and work with them to embrace what they’re going through at that time. I function best in that role.”

Watching people pick themselves back up after they’ve worked to release the stress that has been holding them back is, Mohr believes, the most rewarding job of his role as a chaplain.

“Watching people as they come out of the turmoil and as they get back up and say, ‘Yeah, O.K., I’m good now. Thanks, you were there for me when no one else was. You were there and you were able to help.’ That’s the real kicker in my job.”

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