

ASIANA INSTITUTE

Sports Chaplaincy Curriculum — Academic / Continuing Education Edition

The Way of Respect

Sports Chaplaincy for Muay Thai and Combat Sports: Integrating the Pali Canon, the Wai Khru Ram Muay Tradition, and Modern Sports Chaplaincy

A Five-Session Curriculum with Literature Review, Session Plans, and Paritta Texts

Though one might conquer a thousand fighters in a thousand battles, the greater victory belongs to the one who conquers the fear and anger within. — adapted from the Dhammapada, verse 103

About This Curriculum

This edition expands the original Asiana Institute orientation booklet into a full continuing-education curriculum suitable for sports chaplaincy formation, supervisory review, and accreditation documentation. It is organized in three parts: a literature review establishing the textual, ethnographic, and empirical foundations of the training; five ninety-minute sessions, each with stated objectives, a timed agenda, content notes, experiential practice, and discussion questions; and appendices containing paritta texts and further reading.

Total contact time across the five sessions is approximately seven and a half hours, suitable for inclusion as a continuing-education module. Institute administrators should map the objectives below onto the specific competency domains required by their accrediting body, since standards vary across professional chaplaincy organizations and jurisdictions; this curriculum does not claim certification by, or formal alignment with, any single external accreditor, sporting federation, or Thai cultural authority.

Audience: chaplains, chaplain residents, and gym- or federation-affiliated spiritual-care staff working with combat-sport athletes, with particular attention to Muay Thai. Prior exposure to Buddhist studies or Thai culture is helpful but not required; Session 1 and Session 2 introduce the necessary background. Chaplains who are not themselves practitioners of Muay Thai or Buddhism should pay particular attention to Section G of the literature review, on respectful practice across traditions.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this curriculum, participants will be able to:

1. Articulate the Pali Canon's framing of self-mastery and non-malice as the foundation for ministry in combat sport, with reference to primary sources.
2. Summarize the academic literature on Muay Thai as embodied religious and cultural practice, including critical perspectives on the invention of tradition.
3. Describe the structure and symbolism of the Wai Khru Ram Muay and the chaplain's appropriate relationship to it.
4. Correctly pronounce and appropriately apply two parittas associated with combat, protection, and the honoring of ancestors.
5. Apply a structured before/during/after-fight protocol that coordinates respectfully with trainers and medical staff.
6. Summarize the empirical literature on flow, mindfulness-based performance, and contemplative neuroscience, and apply it pastorally without overstating its claims.
7. Practice self-care and peer-consultation strategies appropriate to ministry in a high-risk physical sport.

Theoretical Foundations: A Literature Review

A. Self-Mastery and Non-Malice in the Pali Canon

The Pali Canon's most direct statement on the relationship between contest and self-mastery appears in the Dhammapada, which holds that conquering a thousand men, a thousand times over, in battle is a lesser feat than conquering oneself (Dhp. 103; trans. Norman, 1997). For a chaplain working in combat sport, this verse reframes the entire purpose of competition: technical skill is necessary but instrumental, in service of mastering fear, anger, and pride rather than of hatred toward an opponent.

This logic is reinforced by the Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā, the “Stanzas of Victory,” a set of eight benedictory verses recited across the Theravāda world before undertakings of significance (The Book of Protection; trans. Piyadassi Thera). Its opening verse recounts the Buddha's confrontation with Māra, who arrives with a thousand weapon-bearing arms and a terrible army; the Buddha is described as prevailing dānādi-dhamma-vidhinā, “by means of generosity and other virtues,” rather than by force. Chaplains can draw a direct, teachable line from this verse to the conduct expected of a Nak Muay: technical aggression within the rules, without malice.

Mettā, loving-kindness extended without exception, including toward one's opponent, is treated in the canon as a high attainment rather than a contradiction of competitive intensity (Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, Sn 1.8). The chaplain's task is to help fighters hold both at once: full competitive commitment, and a heart that does not depend on the opponent's suffering.

B. Muay Thai as Embodied Religious and Cultural Practice: The Academic Literature

Anthropologist Peter Vail conducted the first sustained English-language ethnographic study of Thai boxing, characterizing it as bound up with a constructed national “warrior spirit” (Vail, 1998). In later work, Vail (2014) argues that the sport's royalist-nationalist history is, in significant part, an invented tradition: Thai institutions have, since the twentieth century, deliberately linked Muay Thai to a royalist historical narrative in order to secure its place as an emblem of Thai national identity. This is a methodologically important caution for chaplains: the Wai Khru Ram Muay's claim to ancient, unbroken lineage is itself partly a modern construction, which does not diminish its lived spiritual significance but should temper any chaplain's tendency to present it as historically static.

Pattana Kitiarsa's ethnographic work situates Muay Thai within the everyday lives and masculine identities of Thai boxers, particularly those from rural and working-class backgrounds (Kitiarsa, 2005). In an unfinished study prepared posthumously for publication, Kitiarsa (2013) explored what he termed the “boxing-Buddhism nexus,” arguing that boxing and Buddhism function together as the country's two most influential institutions for the production of Thai national manhood. Paul Schissel's doctoral dissertation extends this analysis specifically to ritual movement, framing the Wai Khru Ram Muay as a form of “sacrificial movement” that mediates the violence of the contest to follow (Schissel, 2019). Together, this literature supports treating the Wai Khru not merely as colorful pageantry but as a serious object of religious and cultural study.

C. The Wai Khru Ram Muay: Ritual Structure and Symbolism

The ceremony divides into two parts. In the wai khru, the fighter circles the ring three times, then kneels and bows three times, traditionally honoring the Triple Gem and asking protection for both fighters and an honorable contest. The ram muay, or “boxing dance,” follows: a personal sequence of movements, at times drawing on the gestures of Hanuman or other figures of Thai epic, that displays the fighter's style, lineage, and gym (Schissel, 2019; Vail, 1998).

Two objects carry particular weight. The mongkol, a sacred headband, is blessed by the trainer or by monks and given to a fighter only when the khru judges them ready; the trainer removes it immediately before the fight and keeps it at the corner, a visible transfer of protection from object to presence. The pra jiad, armbands worn through the bout itself, descend from a soldier's tradition of carrying a blessing into battle. Both objects are, in Kitiarsa's (2013) framing, material expressions of the same boxing-Buddhism nexus that structures the ritual as a whole.

D. Sports Chaplaincy as a Field

Sports chaplaincy has developed over the past several decades into a recognized, if still maturing, area of pastoral practice and scholarship. The field's first major academic anthology, edited by Parker, Watson, and White (2016), brings together chaplains, sport psychologists, and pastoral theologians from the UK, US, Australia, and continental Europe. A consistent theme across that volume is that sports chaplaincy is not a single, homogenous model but a range of approaches shaped by sport, culture, denomination, and level of competition. This curriculum treats Muay Thai chaplaincy as one such context-specific model, adapting the field's general commitments — presence, confidentiality, care that does not depend on performance outcomes — to the particular liturgical and cultural setting of Thai boxing.

E. The Focused Mind: Flow, Mindfulness-Based Performance, and Contemplative Neuroscience

Sport psychology offers an empirical vocabulary for states contemplative traditions have long cultivated. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow describes a state of total absorption in which self-consciousness recedes and action and awareness merge, widely studied since in elite athletic populations. Building on mindfulness-based clinical models, Gardner and Moore (2004) developed the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) approach, a manualized intervention training athletes in nonjudgmental, present-moment attention as a route to performance enhancement; subsequent studies have applied MAC across multiple sports with positive self-reported effects on performance and emotion regulation.

On the neuroscience side, Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson (2008) reviewed evidence that sustained meditation training produces measurable changes in the brain networks underlying attention and emotional regulation, distinguishing focused-attention and open-monitoring styles of practice. This literature lends empirical support to the claim that trained minds function differently under load — a claim long made by contemplative traditions on other grounds. Some researchers in consciousness studies go further, asking whether trained awareness reflects something not fully reducible to brain activity alone; this remains a genuinely open, unresolved question, and chaplains should present it as such rather than as settled science in either direction.

F. Safety Awareness: Injury in Combat Sports

Combat sports carry real and well-documented injury risk. Gartland, Malik, and Lovell (2001), in one of the few dedicated clinical studies of the sport, examined the incidence and pattern of injuries in Muay Thai kickboxing, underscoring that head and lower-limb injuries are a routine feature of competition at every level. Chaplains are not medical providers, but a working knowledge of this literature helps them coordinate appropriately with cutmen, trainers, and ringside physicians rather than either minimizing or catastrophizing the risks fighters accept.

G. A Note on Respectful Practice Across Traditions

This curriculum asks chaplains to hold several things at once: genuine reverence for a living Thai religious and cultural practice that does not belong to them; honest awareness, drawn from Vail (2014) and Kitiarsa (2013), that parts of that practice's claimed antiquity are themselves a modern national project; and pastoral flexibility for fighters who are not Buddhist, not Thai, or not religious at all. The chaplain's role is supportive, not custodial — standing alongside the khru and the fighter's own lineage rather than asserting authority over rituals that belong to others.

H. Points of Convergence

Placed side by side, the Pali Canon's framing of contest and the structure of the Wai Khru Ram Muay illuminate one another without collapsing into each other. The table below is a teaching aid, not a claim of equivalence.

Pali Canon	Wai Khru Ram Muay	Chaplain's Practice
Dhammapada 103 — conquering oneself is the higher victory	Three circuits and three bows before the contest begins	Pre-fight grounding rather than hype
Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā — Māra defeated by virtue, not force	The mongkol's blessing and its transfer to the corner	A quiet chant or blessing offered before the bout
Mettā extended to all beings, including one's opponent	Both fighters perform the wai khru, honoring the same teachers and art	Coaching language that names skill, never hatred
Merit dedication: “Idaṃ me ñātinaṃ hotu...”	The ram muay honors teachers, parents, and ancestors	Post-fight care for the fighter, the family, and the trainers alike

Session Plans

Each session below is designed for ninety minutes with a single facilitator and a cohort of six to fourteen participants. Where possible, Session 2 benefits from a guest khru or experienced trainer; facilitators should arrange this in advance.

Session 1 — Self-Mastery: Pali Canon Foundations for the Discipline of the Ring

Session Objectives

- State the Dhammapada's teaching on self-conquest and apply it to the purpose of competition (Dhp. 103).
- Explain the Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā's framing of virtue-based victory.
- Articulate mettā as compatible with, rather than opposed to, full competitive intensity.
- Practice a guided reflection extending loving-kindness to a named opponent.

Agenda

Time	Segment	Format
0:00–0:15	Opening centering practice (silent sitting, bell)	Experiential
0:15–0:40	Lecture: self-conquest and Dhp. 103	Didactic
0:40–1:00	Text study: the Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā's Māra verse	Guided reading + discussion
1:00–1:20	Guided mettā reflection toward an opponent	Experiential
1:20–1:30	Closing circle and journaling prompt	Reflection

Content Notes

Open with Dhp. 103 and invite participants to sit with the apparent tension between non-harming and striking before resolving it: the canon locates the real contest inside the fighter, not across the ring (Norman, 1997). Move to the Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā's Māra verse, drawing out dānādi-dhamma-vidhinā — victory “by means of generosity and other virtues” — as a teachable frame for technical, rules-bound aggression without malice. Close the didactic portion by introducing mettā (Sn 1.8) as a discipline that intensifies rather than softens competitive focus.

Experiential Practice: Mettā Toward an Opponent (20 minutes)

Participants are invited to bring to mind a real or imagined opponent and to silently extend the traditional mettā wish — may you be safe, may you be free from suffering — while holding, without contradiction, full intention to compete with skill and commitment. Facilitators should normalize discomfort with this exercise; it is meant to surface, not resolve, the tension on the first attempt.

Discussion Questions

1. Where did you feel resistance during the mettā reflection, and what does that resistance tell you about your own relationship to competition?

2. How would you explain dānādi-dhamma-vidhinā (“victory by virtue”) to a fighter who has never encountered Buddhist teaching?
3. Is there a meaningful difference between non-malice and non-aggression? Why does that distinction matter for a combat-sport chaplain?

Reading assignment before Session 2: Vail (2014), introduction and conclusion; Kitiarsa (2013).

Session 2 — Muay Thai as Lived Religion: The Wai Khru Ram Muay and the Academic Literature

Session Objectives

- Summarize Vail's (1998, 2014) and Kitiarsa's (2005, 2013) accounts of Muay Thai as embodied cultural and religious practice.
- Describe the structure of the wai khru and ram muay and the symbolism of the mongkol and pra jiad.
- Distinguish the chaplain's supportive role from the khru's custodial role over the ritual.
- Reflect critically on the “invented tradition” literature without diminishing the ritual's lived pastoral significance.

Agenda

Time	Segment	Format
0:00–0:25	Lecture: Vail, Kitiarsa, and Schissel on Muay Thai as embodied practice	Didactic
0:25–0:50	Guest khru or trainer: ritual structure and meaning (or recorded interview if unavailable)	Guest / applied
0:50–1:10	Small-group discussion: tradition, invention, and lived meaning	Applied / small group
1:10–1:30	Large-group synthesis and chaplain role-boundaries discussion	Discussion

Content Notes

Present Vail's (1998, 2014) argument that Muay Thai's royalist-national history is, in significant part, a twentieth-century invention, alongside Kitiarsa's (2005, 2013) ethnographic account of the sport's role in producing Thai masculine identity and its entanglement with vernacular Buddhism. Walk through the wai khru and ram muay structure — three circuits, three bows, the personal dance, the mongkol and pra jiad — using Schissel's (2019) framing of the ritual as “sacrificial movement” to help participants see it as more than pageantry. Spend deliberate time on the boundary question: the chaplain attends, learns, and honors, but does not perform or alter the ceremony.

Small-Group Discussion Prompt

In small groups: “If part of the Wai Khru's claimed ancient lineage is a modern national construction, does that change its spiritual weight for the fighter performing it today? Why or why not?”

Discussion Questions

1. What surprised you in the academic literature on Muay Thai's invented tradition?
2. How should a chaplain respond if a fighter or trainer is unaware of, or resistant to, this scholarship?
3. Where exactly is the line between standing respectfully near a ritual and overstepping into a role that belongs to the khru?

Session 3 — Parittas for the Ring: Chanting Practicum

Session Objectives

- Correctly pronounce and chant the Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā's Māra verse and the traditional Pali merit-dedication verse.
- Understand each verse's traditional pastoral function.
- Apply both verses sensitively across religious backgrounds, including with non-Buddhist or non-Thai fighters.

Agenda

Time	Segment	Format
0:00–0:15	Background: paritta in the context of combat and contest	Didactic
0:15–0:50	Guided chanting practicum (two verses)	Experiential / call-and-response
0:50–1:10	Cross-religious and cross-cultural sensitivity discussion and role-play	Applied
1:10–1:30	Closing chant and debrief	Experiential

Background

The Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā, the “Stanzas of Victory,” is traditionally recited before undertakings of significance across the Theravāda world (The Book of Protection; trans. Piyadassi Thera). Its first verse, recounting the Buddha's confrontation with Māra, is especially apt for combat-sport ministry because its victory is explicitly a victory of virtue. The merit-dedication verse below is one of the most widely used lines in Theravāda practice for transferring merit to family and ancestors, making it well suited to honoring the people who stand behind every Nak Muay.

1. Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā — the Māra Verse

Traditional use: chanted or read quietly with a fighter before a bout, for courage and virtue-grounded resolve.

*Bāhurū sahaṣṣamabhinimmitasāyudhantaṃ,
Girimekhalaṃ uditaghorasasenamāraṃ,
Dānādīdhammavidhinā jītavā munindo,
Taṃ tejasā bhavatu te jayamaṅgalāni.*

Māra came with a thousand conjured arms, each bearing a weapon, mounted on the elephant Girimekhala, his terrible army roaring around him. The Lord of Sages defeated him through generosity and the other virtues. By that power, may victory and blessing be yours.

2. Merit Dedication for Family, Trainers, and Ancestors

Traditional use: spoken quietly in the corner or in private before the bout, dedicating the fight's discipline and risk to those who made the fighter's path possible.

Idaṃ me ñātīnaṃ hotu, sukhitā hontu ñātayo.

May this merit belong to my relatives; may my relatives be happy.

Practicum Instructions

- Facilitator chants one line at a time; participants repeat (call-and-response) until comfortable, then chant together.
- Practice slow, soft, even pacing; ringside chanting is most often spoken quietly to one fighter, not performed for an audience.
- With non-Buddhist or non-Thai fighters, offer rather than impose either verse, and be prepared to explain its meaning briefly in plain language.
- Chaplains should learn pronunciation from a qualified teacher or verified recording before using either verse liturgically (see Appendix B).

Discussion Questions

1. Which verse felt more natural to offer, and which will require more practice?
2. How would you introduce the merit-dedication verse to a fighter who has never lost a family member, versus one who has?
3. What would you say to a trainer who is skeptical of a chaplain's presence at a Buddhist ritual they did not grow up with?

Session 4 — The Sports Chaplain's Role: Before, During, and After the Fight

Session Objectives

- Apply a structured before/during/after-fight protocol.
- Coordinate appropriately with trainers, cutmen, and medical staff, informed by injury-epidemiology literature.
- Practice post-fight ministry for both winning and losing fighters.

Agenda

Time	Segment	Format
0:00–0:20	Lecture: the before/during/after-fight protocol	Didactic
0:20–0:40	Lecture: injury awareness and coordination with medical staff (Gartland et al., 2001)	Didactic
0:40–1:15	Triad role-play (chaplain / fighter / trainer)	Applied / small group

1:15–1:30	Debrief and large-group discussion	Discussion
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The Protocol

- **Before: grounding, not distraction.** A few minutes of quiet breath, a short mettā recitation, or the merit verse can settle a fighter already flooded with adrenaline. The chaplain works alongside the khru's own pre-fight ritual rather than competing with it.
- **During: present, not positioned at ringside.** The corner belongs to the trainers and cutman. Chaplains should know enough about the sport and its documented injury patterns (Gartland, Malik, & Lovell, 2001) to remain a calm presence, and should agree their role in advance with the medical team in case of serious injury.
- **After: ministry that does not depend on the result.** A win can carry adrenaline, ego, and the temptation to mistake victory for identity. A loss carries grief, shame, and sometimes real injury. In both cases, the chaplain's task is presence without judgment and a reminder that the fighter's worth was never determined by the scorecards.

Role-Play Exercise (35 minutes)

In triads, assign roles of chaplain, fighter, and trainer. Conduct a five-to-seven-minute pre-fight visit incorporating at least one protocol element and one offered (not imposed) verse from Session 3, then a brief post-fight scene — once as a win, once as a loss — and rotate roles so each participant plays the chaplain at least once.

Discussion Questions

1. What was hardest to hold simultaneously — your own presence, the fighter's adrenaline, and the trainer's focus on the task at hand?
2. How did your approach differ between the win scenario and the loss scenario, and should it?
3. What would you do differently at the next event?

Session 5 — The Focused Mind: Integration, Case Consultation, and Self-Care

Session Objectives

- Summarize flow, MAC, and contemplative-neuroscience research and apply it pastorally without overstating its claims.
- Apply the full integrated framework to two composite case studies in small-group consultation.
- Identify signs of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress specific to combat-sport ministry.
- Draft a personal self-care and supervision plan.

Agenda

Time	Segment	Format
0:00–0:10	Centering practice	Experiential

0:10–0:30	Lecture: flow, MAC, and contemplative neuroscience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Gardner & Moore, 2004; Lutz et al., 2008)	Didactic
0:30–1:00	Small-group case consultation (two composite cases)	Applied / small group
1:00–1:20	Self-care discussion and personal plan (individual writing)	Discussion + reflection
1:20–1:30	Closing chant and cohort ritual	Experiential

Composite Case Studies (for training purposes only)

Case 1. A 19-year-old fighter preparing for his first professional bout tells the chaplain he doesn't believe in “any of the religious stuff” but wants help managing pre-fight panic. His trainer expects him to perform the full wai khru regardless.

Case 2. A fighter who lost badly, sustaining a visible injury, refuses to leave the locker room afterward and tells the chaplain she is finished with the sport. Her parents, who funded years of training, are waiting outside.

- In small groups, discuss: What from the literature review (Sections A, E, and F) is relevant here? What from the before/during/after protocol applies? What would you say, and what would you deliberately not say?

Self-Care and Secondary Traumatic Stress

Ministry in a sport with routine injury and public failure or success carries its own cumulative cost, distinct from but related to general sports chaplaincy fatigue described in the field's broader literature (Parker, Watson, & White, 2016). Facilitators should normalize fatigue, vicarious adrenaline, and identification with fighters' losses as expected features of this work, and should review the institute's peer-consultation structures.

Personal Self-Care Plan (15 minutes, individual writing)

Participants write brief responses to: What replenishes me after a hard night at the stadium? Who do I turn to for consultation? What is one boundary I will hold this quarter?

Closing Ritual

Close the curriculum as a cohort by chanting the Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā verse from Session 3 together, followed by a moment of silence and an optional sharing of one word each participant carries forward.

Final Reflection (for continuing-education credit)

Participants submit a 750–1000 word reflective paper applying the integrated framework to a real or anonymized case from their own practice, addressing: (1) what from the Pali Canon and what from the Muay Thai or sports-chaplaincy literature was relevant to the case; (2) which elements of the before/during/after protocol were used; (3) what the chaplain would do differently in a similar future case.

Appendix A — Paritta Quick-Reference Card

A condensed reference suitable for printing as a laminated ringside card; a standalone laminated card containing both verses in full is also available as a separate Asiana Institute document. Full texts and proper pronunciation should be learned in Session 3 before relying on this card alone.

Text	Key Line	When to Use
Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā (Māra verse)	Dānādidhammavidhinā jitavā munindo... (“by generosity and the other virtues...”)	Before the bout, for courage and virtue-grounded resolve
Merit Dedication	Idaṃ me ñātīnaṃ hotu, sukhitā hontu ñātayo. (“May this merit belong to my relatives...”)	To honor family, trainers, and ancestors before stepping into the ring

Appendix B — Suggested Further Reading and Source Texts

For full liturgical texts, verified pronunciation, and deeper study, consult:

- Piyadassi Thera (Trans.). The Book of Protection (Paritta). Buddhist Publication Society — standard published chanting text including the complete Jaya Maṅgala Gāthā.
- Norman, K. R. (Trans.). (1997). The Word of the Doctrine (Dhammapada). Pali Text Society — for Dhammapada 103 in full context.
- SuttaCentral (suttacentral.net) — online libraries of Pali Canon translations, useful for cross-checking texts and pronunciation.
- Vail, P. (2014). Muay Thai: Inventing Tradition for a National Symbol. *Sojourn* 29(3) — essential critical background on the sport's national mythology.
- Kitiarsa, P. (2013). Of Men and Monks: The Boxing-Buddhism Nexus and the Production of National Manhood in Contemporary Thailand. *New Mandala* — the fullest treatment of Buddhism's role in Muay Thai.
- Parker, A., Watson, N. J., & White, J. B. (Eds.). (2016). *Sports Chaplaincy: Trends, Issues and Debates*. Routledge — the field's standard academic anthology.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper & Row — foundational text on the psychology of absorbed performance.

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