



## BUDDHIST

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# GUIDELINES FOR HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS INTERACTING WITH PATIENTS OF THE BUDDHIST RELIGION AND THEIR FAMILIES

## **BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION**

Buddhism is divided into three major branches, each with distinctive beliefs, practices and traditions: ***Theravada Buddhism*** (practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar {Burma}, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam); ***Mahayana Buddhism*** (practiced in China, Korea and Japan), and ***Vajrayana Buddhism*** (practiced in Tibet and Japan). Each major branch includes various sub-branches and groups. (See appendix for examples.)

There is perhaps more diversity of belief and practice in Buddhism than within any of the other major world religions. There is no central authority in Buddhism. There are many denominations of Buddhists and each teaches a form of practice that is regarded as derived from the original teachings of the historic Buddha. It is impossible to cover all possibilities comprehensively in one document. Since many Eastern and Western cultures have varying healing practices, medical ethics, holidays, etc. Buddhism has regarded adaptability to local customs to be of great importance. It is important, therefore, to consult each patient / family regarding how their faith relates to their health care.

The Buddhist population of the world is 252 million with 4 to 5 million living in the United States. In the Metropolitan Chicago area there are 60 temples serving approximately 145,000 to 150,000 Buddhists. The information in this document is applicable to Buddhists who may or may not be of ethnicities that are traditionally Buddhist. Included are specific examples for ***Soto Zen Buddhists*** and ***Tibetan Buddhists*** since these groups are present in the Chicago area.

## **RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

### **All Buddhists**

Buddhism is a way of life taught by the Buddha - historically, a man who lived in India approximately 2500 years ago. He was powerfully moved by seeing the miseries of sickness, old age and death. As a result, he left his family and set out on a quest to find the meaning of life and a solution to the problem of human suffering. Buddhism adheres to the belief that human existence is part of an ongoing cycle of multiple lives (*samsara*) the circumstances of which are governed by one's deeds or actions (*karma*). *Karma* is the law of cause and effect: there is a reason for all things that happen in life - positive action results in positive results; negative action results in negative results. It is believed that all beings possess Buddha-nature (the potential for full and complete enlightenment.) (See appendix.)

All Buddhist traditions hold that there are multiple Buddhas. The Buddha is not regarded as a unique being but as one among many who have rediscovered the *Dharma* that previous Buddhas have already discovered. The *Dharma* (law or teaching) is simply how the world functions. There are differences among the traditions as to how many Buddhas there are and their names. (See *appendix*.)

Among the common teachings in Buddhism are the *Four Noble Truths*:

- that the nature of life involves suffering,
- that suffering is caused by ignorant grasping desires,
- that there is possible a life based on peace and contentment (*Nirvana*), and
- that this life is realized by moderating desire and ameliorating ignorance through the practice of the *Eightfold Noble Way* (or the *Eightfold Path*).

The *Eightfold Path* includes:

- The right understanding
- The right thought
- The right speech
- The right conduct
- The right livelihood
- The right effort
- The right mindfulness
- Meditation

“Right” means that which is true or real and relieves suffering. (See *appendix*.)

The principal ethical teachings of Buddhism center upon the *precepts* (basic moral commitments or vows). These consist of the *refuge precepts* (the *Triple Treasure*) and the *prohibitory precepts*. (See *appendix* for specific details)

*The Triple Treasure*:

- refuge in the Buddha as the perfect teacher,
- refuge in the *Dharma* as the complete teaching, and
- refuge in the *Sangha* as the most perfect life in the community.

The five *prohibitory precepts* that all groups have in common for laity (non-ordained clerics) are:

- Not taking life
- Not stealing
- Not indulging in sexual greed
- Not speaking falsehoods, and
- Not dealing in intoxicants

Most commonly there are from five to ten prohibitory precepts for lay people and from ten to hundreds of precepts for ordained people.

Aside from these elements observed in common, each denomination has a sect name, supreme object(s) of veneration (worship), teachings and precepts, and customs dealing with illness and death. These customs differ from sect to sect. The term “minister” refers to the ordained clergy. Other terms are culture specific and do not apply generally. (See *appendix* for specifics.)

Buddhist services generally involve the recitation of *sutras* (texts of the Buddha's teachings) and other texts which may have been composed long after the Buddha's life but which express

his teachings. *Offerings are made to the Buddha, the main image of worship.* Ritual objects may include a set of beads on a string. These bead sets may be used to count repeated short recitations. (*See appendix*).

### **CULTURE AND CELEBRATIONS**

Buddhists are of many cultures and therefore celebrations of religious events are also not uniform. Either or both the Solar and Lunar New Year's Days may be celebrated. Religiously, the most important celebrations are the days of the birth, enlightenment, and entry into *Nirvana* of the Buddha. There is generally an annual period of paying respect to the family dead, which usually occurs in the summer. (*See appendix for specific details.*)

### **BELIEFS RELATED TO HEALTH CARE**

#### **All Buddhists**

In general, both illness and death are understood as the natural events for all living things. They are not to be feared. It is most important that suffering is to be relieved. Clarity of consciousness is also important. Illness and death are to be faced as clearly and wholeheartedly as possible while pain is relieved. They are not unnatural enemies but simply conditions to be taken care of.

The use of blood transfusions, artificial reproductive technology, and genetic engineering to cure conditions is permitted. Decisions about removing artificial means of life support or not employing such means in the first place should be based primarily upon the wishes of the patient. Difficult decisions on procedures such as abortion are the responsibility of the individual with the religious teacher providing caring consultation and support. If the patient is incapable of expressing a preference, the family must be consulted.

Organ transplants (both donor and recipient) are generally permissible, although with some individuals there is a concern that organ donation may affect the consciousness of the decedent. Some traditions hold this to be possible and, therefore, organ donation may be impossible.

Generally, Buddhists do not have a preference that the health care professional rendering care be of the same sex. An individual may have such a preference, perhaps because of ethnic or cultural values but not because of Buddhist values.

Artificial insemination and birth control are acceptable. There are no restrictions on blood or blood products.

Pain management and palliative care measures are acceptable as they relieve suffering. There is no conflict with the *precept* on intoxication as long as the intention and the effect is simply to relieve physical pain. If the individual patient wishes to minimize the use of pain medication in order to be as lucid as possible then that expressed wish should be respected. In the absence of an expressed wish, standard care is acceptable.

The caregiver should recognize that the role of the priest is to assist the individual Buddhist patient in making the decisions that accord with his/her individual temperament, conditions, and understanding.

### **MEDICAL & NURSING CARE**

The dignity and autonomy of the patient must be supported. There are no specific medical or nursing care issues to be addressed for the Buddhist patient. As with all patients, concern for privacy, the provision of courteous, efficient, focused care, and involvement of the patient/family/surrogate in decision-making, should be primary concerns for the caregivers.

### **SPIRITUAL CARE/PRAYERS**

The nature of spiritual care depends upon the denomination.

**Soto Zen Buddhists:** In the Soto Zen School and other Japanese Buddhist schools, *caution should be observed* with regard to the possibility of a visit by a priest or minister. Some people of Japanese ethnicity may regard the appearance of a priest as a premature memorial service and take offense. Others may be comforted by such a visit. The medical-nursing team and family are encouraged to ascertain the wishes of the patient. This is also the case among many East Asian ethnicities.

A simple altar might be provided upon the patient's request. This would at least consist of a Buddha image (sculpted, printed or painted). In a home setting, front and center of the image could be an incense burner for offering incense, to the right a candle, to the left cut flowers (preferably not a potted plant, especially for ethnic Japanese). **In a hospital or hospice setting** where incense and candles may be inappropriate, fruit, sweets, and electric lights may be substituted.

A visit by a chaplain or priest can take several forms. One might be a simple conversation and counseling meeting for the priest to hear any possible last words the patient may wish to offer. Meditation and recitation of a *sutra* (chanted or recited) may be considered. For Soto Zen people this might be the simple service of reciting the *Heart Sutra* with the patient or doing *zazen* (the practice of zen sitting). If the patient is incapable of sitting up, the practice by the patient of full awareness of body, breath and mind while lying down may be best.

Precept ceremonies may be practiced in the hospital at the patient's request. Precept ceremonies may be of special significance to Buddhists not of Japanese ethnicity who are more likely to find the opportunity of reaffirming the *precepts* to be a comfort. For Japanese Buddhists the similarity of the *precepts* service to a funeral service might cause distress and would not be advised unless strongly requested. (See *appendix*.)

### **DIET/FOOD PREFERENCE & PRACTICES**

#### **All Buddhists:**

Buddhists may or may not be vegetarian or vegan. Many have no specific dietary preference and so consulting the patient and family is advised.

## **END OF LIFE CARE**

### **All Buddhists**

Whether the individual has an advance directive would depend on their culture and ethnicity. The decision to forego life-sustaining efforts is an individual matter that requires consultation with the person concerned and their family.

As the end of life approaches it is important that the attending physician consult the patient, patient's family and priest.

Disposition of the body varies with the culture and denomination. Consult with the family regarding their preferences and their choice of mortician. (*See appendix for specific funeral practices.*)

Beliefs on autopsy vary, therefore the individual or the individual's family must be consulted.

### **Tibetan Buddhists**

In Tibetan traditions, there are several methods for dealing with the terminally ill and dying. One practice is called *phowa*, literally "consciousness transference." This may be done in the patient's room or in a chapel. (*See appendix for details*)

### **Pure Land Buddhists**

For the seriously ill, dying, and deceased there is a practice called the *Pillow Ceremony*. The minister and family and friends gather at the bedside of the patient and recite the *nembutsu* "Namu Amida Butsu".

## **RESOURCES/REFERENCES**

- 1) Official Sotoshu website: <http://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/>.
- 2) Bidford, William. *Soto Zen in Medieval Japan*. University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu, 1993.
- 3) Rinpoche, Sogyal. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. Harper: San Francisco, 1992.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

For contacts in the Buddhist community in case of emergency:

- Pure Land Tradition; Japanese ethnicity: Rev. Koshin Ogui, 312-943-7801
- Theravada Thai Tradition: Ven. Dr. Boonshoo Sriburin, 708-594-6131 or Ajahn Ratana Thongkrajai, 773-784-0257
- Tibetan community: Tsering Tashi, 773-743-7772
- Korean Zen: Ron Kidd , 773-327-1695
- Vietnamese/Chinese Buddhism- International Buddhism Friendship Association: 773-271-5708
- For other ethnic groups. Please call Asayo Horibe, 847-869-5806

## APPENDIX

**Sub-branches of Buddhism - Zen Buddhism** in Japan (known as **Chan Buddhism** in China) is divided among the **Soto**, **Rinzai** and **Obaku** traditions. **Tibetan Buddhism** consists of the **Nyingma**, **Kagyu**, and **Sakya** traditions as well as the Dalai Lama's **Gelugpa** tradition.

**Multiple lives:** The succession of lives is variously interpreted as a metaphor for the change of circumstances in one lifetime or as an expression of the nature of continued existence after death.

**Names of the Buddhas:** The historic Buddha who lived in India approximately 2,500 years ago is revered as *Gotama* Buddha by the *Theravada* school and as *Shakyamuni* Buddha by East Asian Buddhist traditions. In this case the same individual Buddha is called by different names: *Gotama* is the Buddha's family name, *Shakyamuni* is an individual name. The historic Buddha's given name was *Siddhartha*, but it is customary to use a different (religious) name after he took up the religious life. This custom continues with the giving of *Dharma* names to individuals who have become lay Buddhists or have taken ordination. So in the case of the historic Buddha several different names are used depending on which of the Buddha's names (family, given or religious) are preferred by the particular tradition.

In addition, *Mahayana Buddhism* has numerous Buddhas which are not regarded as historic but as symbolic of aspects of the Buddha and his *Dharma*. These symbolize aspects of Buddhahood and Buddhist practice. For example, the Buddha has virtuous conduct, deep compassion and penetrating wisdom. These qualities are symbolized in *Mahayana* Buddhist schools by three *bodhisattvas* (beings who are becoming Buddha) the virtuous *Samantabhadra*, *Avalokiteshvara*, and *Manjushri*. All these have different names depending on the language and culture of the people. All traditions agree upon naming the next Buddha *Maitreya*. In the *Theravada* school these *bodhisattvas* are not used. Instead the Buddha's wisdom and compassion are symbolized by the historic Buddha's principal disciples. For example, *Shariputra* represents the quality of wisdom.

**The Eightfold Path:** "Right" means that which is true or real and relieves suffering. It is distinguished by the Four Characteristics of *Dharma* (or *Dhamma*, right teaching) that are universally agreed upon:

1. Right understanding and practice is based on the impermanence of all sense phenomena,
2. Such phenomena are inherently suffering or unsatisfactory (at least in the sense that they are impermanent).
3. No phenomenon reveals a self-existent being. The idea of a self or a soul is illusory and simply gives rise to disputation since we have no direct experience of such an entity.
4. There is a life of peace and contentment (*Nirvana*) that is realizable.

In short, the four characteristics are that everything that is conditioned (everything we can see, think, or feel) is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not a self or soul. *Nirvana* is that which is unconditioned and is therefore a basis for a contented life even though *Nirvana* is ineffable and not describable.

**Culture specific terms and practices regarding ministers:** “*lama*” refers only to the Tibetan tradition, “*ajahn*” and “*bhikku*” refer only to *Theravada*, and *roshi* refers only to Zen. Ordination customs are different from sect to sect, therefore, what is meant by ordination is not uniform. The ordination is generally vowing to keep a set of *precepts*. For instance the most conservative traditions are according to the traditional home leaving *Vinaya* (precepts) requiring celibacy and tonsure (clipping or shaving a portion of the head). There are also ordinations according to other *precepts* which may permit the ordained to marry and may or may not include tonsure.

**Buddhist worship:** The recitation may be simply spoken, chanted, or sung depending on the tradition. Generally the Buddha is offered flowers symbolic of impermanence, light (candles or other) symbolic of enlightenment, food and drink. Ritual objects may include a set of beads on a string. Usually the number is 108 or an even divisor of that number such as 54 or 27. These bead sets (sometimes called *malas* in Sanskrit or *ojuzu* in Japanese) may be used to count repeated short recitations.

#### Soto Zen Buddhists

- In the Soto Zen School, the main image of worship (*Honzon*) or object of reverence is Shakyamuni Buddha. The main chant employed to offer devotion to the main image of worship (*Honzon Shomyo*) is *Namu-Shakamuni-Butsu* in Japanese and Homage to *Shakyamuni Buddha* (in English).
- In the Soto Zen School the style is expressed as follows: we are all children of the Buddha and come into this world endowed with the Buddha-Mind (*busshin*). However, failing to realize this, we live selfish, willful lives, causing others and ourselves much suffering. If we make repentance to the Buddha and take refuge in him, our spirits will come to rest, our lives will experience harmony and light, and we will rejoice in being of service to society. We will also experience the deep faith that will allow us to withstand any hardship. To discover happiness and a life worth living here and now is the aim of the teaching of the Soto Zen School. The primary spiritual exercise is still sitting in *zazen*.

#### Tibetan Buddhists

- The supreme objects of veneration may vary with sect and also with the individual. In Tibetan Buddhism the non-historic Buddhas *Amitabha* (meaning Infinite Light, one symbol of awakening as a cosmic principle) or *Amitayus* and *Maitreya* (the future Buddha) are most popular, as is the *Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig)*. The very popular chant of devotion to *Chenrezig* is employed by nearly all Tibetan Buddhists: “*Om-mani-padme-hum*” (Sanskrit) and “*Om the Jewel in the Lotus hum*” (English).
- The style of teaching that is most common in Tibetan Buddhism involves guru devotion. Tibetan Buddhism teaches adherents to see their personal teacher or minister (in Tibetan language, *lama*) as representing the Buddha himself. The individual carries out ritual devotional and meditative practices as provided by the teacher. Thus the Tibetan Buddhist practitioner takes refuge in the lama and takes strict vows not to reveal to others the content of that teaching if it involves special empowerments to practice.

#### Pure Land Buddhists

- The supreme object of veneration in the Pure Land Schools is *Amida* Buddha who combines the symbolism of *Amitabha* (Boundless Light) and *Amitayus* (Boundless Life). As a *bodhisattva* this Buddha took the vow that he would not attain Buddhahood until all

beings had already been saved. Thus the implication that we have already received our salvation from this Buddha as an act of pure grace, not on our own merits. The popular *nembutsu* chant in Japanese "*Namu Amida Butsu*" means "*Homage (or devotion) to Amida Buddha*". In Chinese the pronunciation is "*Na Mu O Mi To Fu*".

### **Precepts:**

#### **Soto Zen Buddhists**

- In the Soto Zen School additional *precepts* are required of confirmed lay people. In addition to the three refuges are the three collective pure *precepts* (to cease from evil, to do only good, and to dedicate that good to the welfare of all beings), and ten prohibitory *precepts*. The ten prohibitory precepts consist of the above five plus not discussing the faults of others, not praising the self nor slandering others, not begrudging the gift of the *Dharma* or material benefits, not indulging in anger, and not disparaging the *Triple Treasure*.

#### **Tibetan Buddhists**

- In the Tibetan traditions there are many *precepts* for practitioners. Of great importance are the *samaya precepts*, which are taken along with initiation or empowerment in specific practices.

**Multiple Buddhas:** A Buddha's awakening or enlightenment consists in rediscovering the *Dharma* that previous Buddhas have already discovered. In this sense Buddhism is not a revealed religion but a rediscovered one. The teaching is not revealed from a supernatural source but is a natural discovery about the world. Each Buddha establishes a dispensation of teaching of the *Dharma*, which may differ in details but agrees in essentials.

**Culture and Celebrations:** The Solar and Lunar New Year's Days may be celebrated. In Japan, only the Solar New Year is celebrated. In China both days may be celebrated. In Tibet, *Lhosar*, the Lunar New Year is celebrated. Religiously, the most important celebrations are the days of the birth, enlightenment, and entry into *Nirvana* of the Buddha. In the *Theravada* tradition these are celebrated on the same day (*Visakkha*) according to the lunar calendar and so the date varies from year to year. In Japan, the celebrations are separated and fixed on the solar calendar as April 8, December 8, and February 15 respectively. There is generally an annual period of paying respect to the family dead, which usually occurs in the summer. The date varies with location and can be as early as early July and as late as mid August. It is customary for each location to have their own traditional date in Japan so that not everyone needs vacation leave to visit the family home at the same time. Each village temple determines their own date for this memorial.

Several centuries ago, Soto Zen priests would perform *precepts* ceremonies perhaps also giving a general or personal *kechimyakyu* (lineage document) on occasions of people undergoing illness or other troubles. A general *kechimyakyu* would not be made out to the specific individual. It would also be acceptable to perform *zaike tokudo* (lay initiation). In that case the *kechimyaku* would be made out to the *dharma* name of the person receiving the *precepts*. However, it should be clear that this should not be confused with the funeral service in which a posthumous *dharma* name (*kaimyo*) is given.

**End of Life Care:** *Phowa*, a Tibetan Buddhist practice, involves training the patient in a meditative technique whereby the consciousness is transferred to a Buddha's Pure Land, usually *Amitabha Buddha's*. It has several forms but most commonly three recognitions are used: recognition that the central channel of the nervous system is the path, consciousness as



the traveler, and the Buddha's Pure Land is the destination. This practice should only taught by qualified teachers.

**Funeral Practices/Disposition of the Body:** For ethnic Japanese, cremation is the predominant custom. The funeral service occurs prior to cremation or inhumation (burial) and can be understood as consisting of a posthumous ordination (to the clergy). Memorial services are performed at times of significance in Japanese culture: 7 days and 49 days after death and at especially meaningful anniversaries: 1, 3, 7, 13, 17, 23, 27, 33, and 50 years. For non-Japanese people inhumation (burial) may be preferred and the funeral and/or memorial services should be scheduled in accordance with family wishes.

The selection of cremation or inhumation (burial) for disposal of remains is best done in accordance with the individual or family wishes. Many Buddhists prefer cremation but this is not exclusive. The Tibetan practice of sky burial (exposure of the body to scavenging birds) is practical where fuel is too scarce for cremation and soil conditions may make inhumation impractical.

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