

A guide for healthcare professionals: Death and bereavement in Buddhism

What is Buddhism?

Buddhism is a non-theistic religion and/or system of thought founded by Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha, The Awakened One) more than 2500 years ago in North East India.

The study and practice of Buddhist principles is designed to lead to the end of suffering and the release from the cycle of rebirth in Samsara. Practices and chants may be specific to different traditions, schools and ethnicities, hence the importance of correctly identifying a patient's allegiances, if any, at the End of Life (EOL). Please ask about the patient's ethnicity and the school they subscribe to – the following list may be useful although some patients may subscribe to other religions/worldviews (e.g. Taoism, Shinto):

- Theravada, including Vipassana and Early Buddhism (Pali Chanting)
- Vajrayana or Tibetan or Tantrayana (Tibetan Chanting)
- Mahayana (Sino/Japanese and Sanskrit Chanting) or more specifically: Pure Land, Shin, Ch'an, Zen, Interbeing, Soka Gakkai, True Buddha, Shingon, Nichiren, Triratna, Tientai/Tendai, Humanistic, and additionally Tao/Dao, Shinto
- Any other: Ambedkarites, Navayana, New Kadampa, Newar, Secular, Engaged, Modernist, New Movements, Non-Denominational

What are the main considerations when someone is approaching death?

Traditions and schools

Guidance is important in all schools of Buddhism, especially at EOL. For some schools, special ministerial functions (e.g. Empowerment and Powa at death) can only be performed by authorised individuals. To provide the appropriate support, it's important that you ask the patient and their family what tradition or school of Buddhism they subscribe to and remember that their ethnicity may be relevant too. Many, but not all, Buddhists will accept the assistance of chaplains of other traditions or schools.

Environment

Death marks a transition to a new mode of existence and the state of mind of a dying patient may well have

a critical impact on the experience that follows and eventual rebirth. The environment should be calm and peaceful, allowing attention to turn inwards, and conducive to a final letting go. The patient may want some artefacts by their bedside (e.g. a Buddha image and Mala beads) and a smartphone to access chants (e.g. Dechen Monlam and Paritta) and scriptures (e.g. the Dhammapada and Suttas/Suttas) online.

Caregivers

Ideally, the patient's own spiritual caregiver should be allowed to talk to them, advise them, perform last rites, read scriptures, chant, etc. If the faith leader/chaplain's physical presence is not recommended for health and safety reasons, every effort should be made to facilitate an online connection. When faith leaders are not available or the patient is not a member of any group, please contact The Buddhist Society for advice (see details on the next page).

Dying process

This can take longer for Buddhists than normally assumed – three or four hours at least, culminating with the advent of Rigor mortis, but for some traditions/schools, it might take days, with some form of consciousness lingering around. This process should inform the care of the deceased's body.

Medical procedures

Resuscitation is an acceptable procedure but many Buddhists value a natural death and may decline intrusive procedures or medication that prolong life unnecessarily or compromise awareness/alertness. For post-mortem procedures and removal of organs for donation/transplantation, explicit consent from the patient and family should always be sought. The Buddhist tradition honours generosity in life and in death and suggests that a life of practice would enable the dying person to put up with any possible discomfort and psychological shock resulting from the removal of organs, with favourable karmic outcomes.

What are the main considerations after someone has died?

Care of the body

Where possible, the body of the deceased should be left undisturbed until Rigor mortis sets in. It can, however, be moved to a suitable cold storage area so that life

support equipment can be readied for re-use. Please note, from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, the body should not be touched or disturbed at all during the dying process, in particular following the final breath and up to 30 minutes afterwards. Ordained monastics or priests who have died should not have their religious robes removed, unless strictly necessary.

Personnel

The bodies of Buddhist patients can be handled by other faith personnel. Respectful care of the body is expected (perhaps a bow could be made before touching it). A short end of life service is also available, which can be read out by any available chaplain of any religion or a healthcare professional if a Buddhist chaplain or faith leader cannot be contacted in time.

Funeral customs and mourning practices

Where circumstances allow, Buddhist funerals should take place within seven days. A service may be held in the house of the deceased or at the Funeral Parlour prior to the main service at the cemetery or crematorium. Memorial services may take place on the 3rd, 7th, 30th, 49th and 100th day following the funeral, depending on traditions and ethnic culture. Please note, this could be relevant for serving NHS staff who suffer a loss. The grief process depends on the individual and can take time, especially when children, traumatic circumstances or suicide are involved.

Expectations in a pandemic

In general, Buddhism is flexible and pragmatic with respect to disaster responses and funeral rites. During a pandemic, there is no expectation that dead bodies should be washed and dressed or that inserted tubes are removed, etc – personnel safety comes first. If a hospital has sought the help of the Army in handling bodies, soldiers are not expected to be involved in any religious rituals, but can if they wish to. Though most Buddhist societies cremate their dead, no major doctrinal significance is attached to this so, in emergency situations, deceased Buddhist patients can either be buried or cremated.

London Bereavement Support Programme

This resource has been funded and supported by the Mayor of London under the remit of the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Mission](#), which is being led by Thrive LDN. The mission aims to build a coalition of wellbeing champions and empower Londoners to act to improve their own and their communities' wellbeing. For more information visit www.thriveldn.co.uk.



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Where can I get more advice and support?

The Buddhist Society is a useful source of information and advice (www.thebuddhistsociety.org | info@thebuddhistsociety.org | 0207 834 5858). Its Spiritual Care team caters for all traditions and will always try to contact groups from the relevant tradition in the first instance.

Out-of-hours/holidays/emergency:

For out-of-hours/holidays/emergency support, please email buddhacare@gmx.com. You'll receive an automatic reply with a phone number to contact. Please leave a message and your phone number so they can get back to you asap. If no next of kin can be identified, or no specific Buddhist school/group is requested, the Buddhist Society can help officiate at funerals and memorial services on the basis of voluntary contributions. It can also help when difficult/complex ethical issues need to be investigated and choices made.

Download the Emergency Non-Denominational Buddhist Rites at End of Life and Funeral Service from the Good Thinking website (www.good-thinking.uk/bereavement).