

4. Buddhism

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Overview FAQ

1. When, where, and how did Buddhism originate?

Buddhism originated in 528 BCE when a young man named Siddhartha Gautama (the historical *Buddha*) attained Enlightenment and began to teach in northeast India.

The Buddha came from royalty and was trained from a young age to succeed his father as king. After a secret excursion outside of the palace grounds exposed him to the suffering of others, he decided to dedicate himself to discovering the source of suffering and finding a way to end it.

At age 29, he left his wife and son behind to become a Hindu ascetic. After six years of yogic practices, the true nature of reality dawned on him as he meditated under a *bodhi* tree in Bodhgaya, India. He became known as the Awakened One (the Buddha) and began teaching others how to escape the earthly cycle of suffering.

2. Does Buddhism have sacred texts? What are they called?

The sacred texts of Buddhism are collectively called the *Dharma* and include:

- ✧ The *Pali* canon (the collected works of the Buddha);
- ✧ The *Tengyur* (the collected commentaries of Buddhist saints); and
- ✧ The *tantras* (the collected works of the founder and followers of the *Tantric* school of Buddhism).

The Buddha's teachings are divided into the *Sutras* (discourses on various topics), *Vinaya* (rules of conduct), and *Abhidharma* (philosophy).

In addition, any original teaching or commentary by a Buddhist master may become a central sacred text for that particular Buddhist tradition.

3. What are Buddhism's core beliefs?

The Buddha's fundamental teachings are the *Four Noble Truths*:

1. The experience of all living beings is wrought with suffering;

2. The cause of suffering is clinging to that which is subject to change;
3. Suffering ends when one relinquishes clinging and desire; and
4. Following the path to Enlightenment can end the cycle of suffering.

Buddhists believe in the law of cause and effect (*karma*) and reincarnation. As long as one continues to cling to this world, suffering will continue and that person will be trapped in a cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). When one attains Enlightenment (*Nirvana*), one is no longer bound by the cycle of reincarnation and suffering ends.

The way to achieve Enlightenment is by following the *Eightfold Path* of ethical behavior: right view – which means seeing the world through the lens of the Four Noble Truths – right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

4. What are Buddhism's core practices?

In terms of personal conduct, Buddhism emphasizes the Five Precepts: refraining from killing, stealing, harsh language or lying, sexual misconduct, and indulging in intoxicants.

Buddhist practice consists of contemplation of the Buddha's teachings and meditation in order to realize one's true nature. Meditation may be done in solitude or in regular meetings with other Buddhists. Depending on one's tradition, meditation can include the recitation of prayers and mantras, visualization of various emanations of the Buddha, and inducement of a trance-like state (*Samadhi*).

Compassionate activities, such as saving the lives of animals and helping those in need, are also encouraged. Violence is considered unwise and runs counter to the Four Noble Truths, since anger and violence imply an attachment to the material world.

5. What are Buddhism's important holidays? How are they celebrated?

Different Buddhist groups emphasize different holidays. Buddhist holidays follow the lunar calendar and will fall on different days each year. There are four main holidays celebrating different events in the life of the historical Buddha:

- ✧ **Chotrul** is a Tibetan celebration commemorating miracles performed by the historical Buddha during his lifetime on each of the first 15 days of the Lunar New Year (late February/early March). Many dedicate this time to prayer and meditation. The 15th day of the Lunar New Year is known as "The Day of Miracles," and many Buddhist monasteries host a ritual dance festival.
- ✧ **Wesak** (also called *Saga Dawa*): This holiday, which falls in May or June, celebrates the historical Buddha's birth, Enlightenment, and passing into Nirvana. The holiday includes a ceremonial feast and is dedicated to prayer and meditation.

- ✧ **Asala** (also called *Chokhor*): This holiday, which falls in July, celebrates the Buddha's first sermon, given to five disciples in seven weeks after his Enlightenment. Buddhists dedicate the day to reading and practicing the Buddha's teachings.
- ✧ **Lha Bab**: This holiday, which falls in November or December, celebrates one of the Buddha's "Eight Great Deeds" and his journey to heaven to repay his mother's kindness by teaching her and the celestial beings in heaven the path to Enlightenment. The holiday includes a ceremonial feast offering and is dedicated to prayer and meditation.

6. How many adherents of Buddhism are there in the United States?

Are they located in a particular region?

There are estimated to be 6-7 million Buddhists living in the United States, of which 75% are of Asian decent. Western Buddhists are concentrated in the Northeast Corridor, Colorado, California, and the Pacific Northwest. Asian Buddhists are found primarily in major metropolitan areas nationwide.

7. What are the main sects or denominations within Buddhism?

For the first 400 years after his passing, the Buddha's disciples (many of them were ordained monks) carried on his tradition in small monasteries throughout Northern India. Shortly after the start of the Common Era, the tradition evolved into three main schools:

- ✧ **Mahayana** ("Great Vehicle") emphasizes the power of compassion to bring one to a state of Enlightenment. It also recognizes other Buddhist masters as being Buddhas in their own right. It is the most popular sect of Buddhism in China, India, Tibet, Vietnam, Japan, Korea, and Mongolia.
- ✧ **Theravada** ("Way of the Elders") focuses on traditional practices like meditation, and does not recognize latter-day Buddhas. It is the most popular sect of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.
- ✧ **Vajrayana** ("Diamond Vehicle") emphasizes mental and physical yogic techniques to move toward a natural state of Enlightenment. It is found most often in the Himalayas, Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal, and India.

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Intersections with Health Care: FAQ

1. Does Buddhism have a particular view about what causes illness?

Are there illness-related rituals?

Most Buddhists believe that illness is caused by one's past negative actions; as such, illness is also an opportunity to clear past debts. Many believe in holistic medicine and may prefer to use traditional herbal remedies and avoid Western medicine. Some sects of Buddhism also blame illness on malevolent spirits, requiring exorcism by a Buddhist master.

Many Buddhists will pray and perform rituals to the Medicine Buddha, a manifestation of the Buddha that promotes healing. Others may recite purification prayers, or try to create favorable circumstances for healing by engaging in virtuous deeds.

2. Does Buddhism prescribe a particular type of dress for men or women?

Ordained monks and nuns wear thin cotton robes of a specific hue according to their traditions; common colors include maroon, white, and orange. Lay Buddhists often dress modestly and may not be comfortable wearing shorts or revealing shirts.

Depending on the Buddhist denomination, believers may wear blessed cords or amulets around their necks or wrists. These items should not be removed without the patient's consent; if removal is necessary, they should be kept clean and safe.

3. Are there any prayer or ritual observances that are likely to occur during the patient's stay?

Prayer and meditation are core practices for almost all Buddhists. Depending on individual and denominational beliefs, these practices may occur throughout the day, with early morning being the most common time. Patients may prefer to meditate on the floor; some may also wish to sleep on the floor. Offer privacy and quiet during meditation; if possible, a side room should be made available.

Any scriptures in the room should be treated with great respect. Objects should not be placed on them, nor should they ever be placed on the floor.

Many Buddhists will choose to have an image of a Buddha in the room. This should not be touched without the patient's consent. Additionally, the patient may wish to have flowers or incense near the image. You may need to discuss these practices with the patient if, for example, incense is not allowed.

4. Does Buddhism have hygiene or washing requirements?

Most Buddhists wash their hands in running water before meditation. If access to running water is not an option, they should be provided with a jug or bowl.

5. Are there any dietary restrictions?

Many Buddhists are strict vegetarians and abstain from drinking alcohol or ingesting anything believed to dull the senses. However, the individual patient should be asked because there are no strict, universally observed dietary rules.

Most monks and nuns will not eat a meal after noon. On holidays, some lay Buddhists will also follow this practice. Others may choose to fast on new moon and full moon days.

6. Are there any medications, treatments, or procedures that Buddhists cannot accept?

One of the *Five Precepts* of Buddhist tradition calls for abstention from intoxicants that “cloud the mind,” so some Buddhists are hesitant to take medication believed to alter their consciousness; this includes medicine that contains alcohol. Some may also prefer to meditate to ease pain before agreeing to begin taking pain medication. Vegetarians may wish to avoid medications containing animal byproducts.

7. Can Buddhist patients see providers of the opposite sex?

Most Buddhists do not have a religious conflict with seeing providers of the opposite sex.

8. Can Buddhists donate organs or accept donor organs?

Most Buddhists will not object to either organ donation or reception. However, there is no universal Buddhist teaching on this. Some view it as good karma to donate, while others believe that it disturbs the death process. In either case, no organs should be removed until consciousness has completely left the body (see question #13 below), as Buddhism teaches that consciousness exists within all organs of the body and not only in the brain.

9. Should I consult anyone other than the patient when seeking informed consent or other patient decisions?

In general, this is not necessary, although some patients may want the advice of a spiritual leader.

10. What is Buddhism’s view on reproductive health and family planning?

Are contraceptives okay? What about abortion? Voluntary sterilization?

Buddhism teaches that life begins at conception, so there is generally no objection to contraception that prevents fertilization (e.g., condoms).

Most Buddhists would consider abortion to be a very serious negative action, because Buddhism teaches that a fetus has consciousness either from the moment of conception or within several days of conception. However, there are a range of beliefs on this issue.

11. Are there particular beliefs or rituals concerning pregnancy and birth?

What about postpartum women? What about women who have miscarried?

Depending on the branch of Buddhism, the family may choose to give their child a Buddhist name during a formal naming ceremony at the local temple or residence of a spiritual master. Before this ceremony, the child may be given an initial name by the parents. It is important to include both names in the clinical notes.

If a baby dies during delivery, a Buddhist clergy member will often be brought in to conduct rituals and pray. Lay Buddhists may also perform prayers and ceremonies for the recently deceased in the absence of a clergy member.

12. Are there end-of-life rituals or beliefs I need to know about?

For many Buddhists, it is important to have a clergy member around to guide them through the dying process. Most will also want to be surrounded by family and friends, who may chant mantras and meditate with the patient. Some may prefer to die in their own homes, and this should be allowed if possible.

Each denomination has slightly varying beliefs about the process of death, so each patient needs to be consulted. However, across all traditions, it is customary for Buddhists to spend their final time in meditation (both with loved ones and individually). In order to have an unclouded state of mind at death and pave the way for rebirth, some Buddhists resist sedatives or palliative drugs. Additionally, if an illness has advanced to an incurable stage, some Buddhist patients may refuse medical treatment.

If possible, the patient should be provided with a quiet space. Some may wish to have a Buddha figure close by and may burn incense or a candle.

Buddhism teaches that death is an inevitable part of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Some Buddhist patients may resist life support, seeing it as interference to a natural cycle.

It is important to inform a fellow Buddhist of the death (including the time of death) so that proper prayers and rituals can be conducted for the recently deceased.

13. What should be done with the body after death?

Some Buddhists believe that consciousness remains in the body for up to three days after the patient stops breathing. It is important that the body not be moved or disturbed until consciousness ceases, if possible. If the patient dies in a hospital, the body should be left in an empty room where family and friends may gather to chant and pray. If no fellow Buddhists are present, staff should contact a Buddhist spiritual leader of the same denomination.

The body should be wrapped in a plain sheet with no religious symbols.

Most Buddhists will not object to a postmortem on religious grounds so long as it does not occur before the consciousness has left the body. Once consciousness has ceased, the body itself is not held in great reverence.

Generally, cremation is preferred.

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Buddhism: Intersections with Health Care

Buddhism teaches that the body is a temporary shell for the spirit and should be treated with great respect so the mind can be free to concentrate on pursuing enlightenment, which is the ultimate goal of existence.

These beliefs have significant implications for practitioners of Western medicine. For example, some Buddhists believe that adversity can lead to personal transformation and transcendence; those who ascribe to this belief may resist some treatments or medications, especially those that cloud the mind. Similarly, aspects of modern Western health care facilities are at odds with a practicing Buddhist's needs. In particular, an ICU or emergency department – with bright lights, constant noise, and close patient monitoring – may not provide the quiet environment a Buddhist

may need for contemplation and may be an additional source of stress. However, many Buddhists combine Western health care with Eastern cultural traditions.

Quick answers for many questions that arise when caring for a Buddhist patient may be found in the FAQ. For more in-depth explanations, consult the appropriate section below.

CAUSE OF ILLNESS AND HEALING RITUALS

Most Buddhists believe that illness is caused by one's past negative actions. The sum total of a person's actions, past and present, make up an individual's karma. A person's karma actively affects one's present and future experiences, thus making one responsible for one's own life. In Buddhism, therefore, an illness can be the culmination of many lifetimes' worth of karma. As such, it can be an opportunity to clear one's karmic debts.

Many Buddhists believe in holistic internal medicine and may see illness as a result of an imbalance in their inner energy channels. For this reason, some may prefer to take traditional herbal remedies and may choose to avoid Western medicine. Some Buddhists from Southeast Asia may also use traditional Indian or Chinese remedies. Thus, providers should always ask patients about any herbal or other remedies they are currently using. In addition, some sects of Buddhism may also blame illness on a malevolent spirit, requiring exorcism by a Buddhist master.

To treat an illness, many Buddhists will pray and perform rituals to the Medicine Buddha, a manifestation of the Buddha who promotes healing. Others may recite purification or obstacle-clearing prayers, or may try to create favorable circumstances (or positive karma) by engaging in virtuous deeds such as charitable giving or saving the life of an animal.

DRESS & MODESTY

Buddhism does not promulgate specific rules for how lay adherents should dress, and most followers will wear clothing that aligns with local culture.

Ordained monks and nuns wear thin cotton robes of a specific hue according to their countries of origin and Buddhist traditions; common colors include maroon, saffron (yellow), white, and orange. The robes are simple garments, draped around the body and over the shoulder, in emulation of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who is believed to have worn a patchwork robe made of donated cloth. Most robes are a single color, although Tibetan Buddhist robes are often more elaborate. Lay Buddhists often dress modestly and may not be comfortable wearing shorts or revealing shirts.

Depending on the Buddhist denomination, believers may wear blessed cords or amulets around their necks or wrist to ward off danger and promote good fortune. These items should not be removed without patient consent; if removal is necessary, they should be kept clean and safe.

PRAYER & RITUAL OBSERVANCES

Prayer and meditation are extremely important practices for almost all Buddhists, as it is through meditation that one comes to understand the Four Noble Truths and achieve enlightenment. Depending on individual and denominational beliefs, prayer and meditation may occur at any time throughout the day, with early morning being

the most common time. Patients may prefer to meditate on the floor; some may also wish to sleep on the floor. Offer privacy and quiet during meditation to the extent it can be done; if possible, a side room should be made available.

There are a wide variety of meditation techniques employed by the various schools of Buddhist teaching. An adherent may just sit quietly, focus on breathing, engage in visualization, or contemplate a particular image, idea, or scriptural passage; some Buddhists may combine one or more methods. One of the most popular forms of meditation (particularly among Theravada Buddhists) is called *metta bhavana*. During metta bhavana or “loving-kindness,” the practitioner aims to achieve a state of loving kindness toward all sentient beings.

Any scriptures in the room should be treated with great respect. Objects should not be placed on them, nor should they ever be placed on the floor.

Many Buddhists will choose to have an image of a Buddha in the room. This should not be touched without the patient’s consent. Additionally, the patient may wish to have flowers or incense near the image. You may need to discuss these practices with the patient if, for example, incense is not allowed.

DIETARY REQUIREMENTS

Buddhism teaches non-violence and that a Buddhist should not cause the death of any other living being, so many Buddhists are strict vegetarians or vegans. Some may eat meat, but will limit the types of animal flesh they consume based on the amount of suffering and death involved. For example, eating beef may be permissible because many people can be fed from the death of a single cow; eating clams may be impermissible because many clams must be killed to make a single meal. Providers should discuss the nuances of dietary restrictions with Buddhist patients, although vegetarian meals are almost always safe.

Most monks and nuns will not eat a meal after noon, emulating the Buddha and following his recommendation. On holidays, some lay Buddhists will also follow this practice.

Some Buddhists may choose to fast on new moon and full moon days, to purify themselves, gain self-control, and help focus their minds. Depending on the school, fasting usually means abstaining from all solid foods but *not* liquids; in addition, fasts often begin after noon. Furthermore, although some fasting is encouraged, asceticism is not; the Buddha taught moderation in all things. Thus, a fast may have less impact for a Buddhist patient on a regimen of drug therapy than it might for a Muslim patient for whom fasting requires total abstention from all liquids and solids.

Many Buddhists also abstain from drinking alcohol or ingesting anything that would dull the senses, pollute the body, and affect one’s mindfulness. As noted below, medications containing alcohol or narcotics should be avoided when possible. If a physician does prescribe medication containing alcohol or narcotics, the nature of and reason for the prescription should be carefully explained to the patient. This prohibition is not a hard and fast rule followed by all, and the individual patient should always be consulted.

MEDICATION, TREATMENT, OR PROCEDURE RESTRICTIONS

One of the Five Precepts of Buddhist tradition states that adherents are to abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind. Therefore, some Buddhists may be hesitant to take medication that is believed to alter their state of consciousness, including medicines that contain either alcohol or narcotics. Some may also prefer to meditate to ease pain before they decide to begin taking medication.

If a particular medication for pain-relief purposes can affect the mind, providers should discuss alternate methods of pain relief with the patient. However, if a medication is necessary to resolve an illness, providers should clearly explain what they are recommending and why. It may also be helpful for the patient to speak to his/her Buddhist spiritual leader, who may be a Buddhist master, monk, nun, or revered layperson, depending on the branch of Buddhism practiced and the individual beliefs of the patient.

Some Buddhists are vegetarian and may not want to take medications that contain animal byproducts (see Dietary Requirements).

GENDER & MODESTY

In general, Buddhists do not believe that there is a religious conflict with seeing providers of the opposite sex. However, this may vary depending on culture or country of origin; each patient should be consulted for his/her preferences.

ORGAN DONATION

Most Buddhists will not object either to organ donation or reception. However, there is no universal Buddhist teaching on this, and there is some disagreement among the different Buddhist schools.

Some schools view it as good karma to donate organs, as giving the gift of life to another is a tremendous act of kindness and manifestation of metta, loving-kindness.

Others believe that organ donation disturbs the death process, or that issues of life and death should be left to take their natural course.

In either case, no organs should be removed until consciousness has completely left the body (see End of Life). Buddhism teaches that consciousness exists within all organs of the body and not only in the brain. Thus, one does not assume that a person is dead because brain function has ceased. Indeed, it may be necessary for a religious leader to confirm death before a family will allow organs to be harvested.

INFORMED CONSENT & PATIENT DECISION MAKING

There is no overarching rule on decision making; the patient should be asked whether or not s/he desires a spiritual leader to be brought into the conversation. Depending on the branch of Buddhism practiced and the individual preference of the patient, the spiritual leader may be a Buddhist master, a monk, nun, or revered clergyperson. Some Buddhists may also wish for respected family members to be present when discussing important decisions.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & FAMILY PLANNING

Generally, Buddhism does not prescribe or condemn particular sexual partnerships in the way many other religious traditions do (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, all of which frown upon sex outside of marriage), nor does it teach monogamy. As long as

the relationships themselves are entered into freely and are not dependent on lying or manipulation, all manner of relationships may be permissible. This includes homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships. Some Buddhists may also practice chastity in order to focus and devote more energy to reaching enlightenment.

While there are no established doctrines around family planning for Buddhists, there is a general reluctance to disturb the natural development of life. As a result, some Buddhists will accept all methods of family planning, but with varying degrees of reluctance. Generally, Buddhism teaches that life begins at conception, so there is not likely to be an objection to contraceptives that prevent conception (e.g., a condom). Conversely, those that would prevent a fertilized ovum from being successfully implanted (e.g., an intrauterine device or emergency contraception) may be more problematic.

Most Buddhists would consider abortion to be a very serious, negative action because it is taught that the fetus has consciousness either at the moment of conception or within several days thereafter. Some Buddhists will make allowances for the health of the mother, arguing that the mother's life takes precedence over fetal health. Each individual should be asked, however, because there are a wide range of beliefs. Depending on the circumstances, it may also be helpful to involve a Buddhist spiritual leader in the conversation.

PREGNANCY & BIRTH

Given that a sentient being has the capacity to be reborn into many forms, both human and animal, human birth is generally viewed as auspicious. A baby is considered particularly fortunate if it is born with all six senses. In Buddhism, these are: taste, touch, smell, hearing, sight, and mental functioning. Any disabilities with which a child might be born are often attributed to karma, and are regarded as the consequences of negative actions in a past life.

Depending on the branch of Buddhism, the family may choose to give their child a Buddhist name during a formal naming ceremony at the local temple or residence of a spiritual master. Before this ceremony, the child may be given an interim name by the parents. It is important to include both names in the clinical notes, if the second name is already chosen. In some schools, the naming ceremony occurs later in life (anywhere from three to eight years of age).

If a baby dies during delivery, a Buddhist clergy member will often be brought in to conduct rituals and prayers for the dead. Lay Buddhists may also perform prayers and ceremonies for the recently deceased in the absence of a clergy member.

END OF LIFE

Buddhism teaches that death is inevitable and a part of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Although the physical body will pass away, the essence of the person's consciousness will be reborn into another vessel (unless the patient has reached enlightenment). Death is a necessary part of this process. Because of this, some Buddhist patients may resist life support and resuscitation, seeing it as needlessly interfering with a natural process.

A Buddhist who knows that s/he is near death will probably spend a great deal of time in meditation, necessitating as much peace and quiet as can be provided.

For many Buddhists, it is important to have a clergy member present to guide them through the dying process. Most will also want to be surrounded by family and friends, who may chant mantras and meditate with the patient; for many Buddhists, one of the greatest acts of kindness is to help another person attain a positive state of mind in preparation for death. Some believe that Buddhist tradition dictates that people not cry in the presence of a dying person or someone who has ceased to breathe; it is believed that this may disturb consciousness and clarity of mind at the moment of death. Some Buddhists may prefer to die in their own homes, which should be allowed if possible.

Each denomination has slightly varying beliefs about the process of death, so each patient and family should be consulted. However, across the traditions, it is customary for Buddhists to spend their final time in meditation as much as they are able (both with loved ones and individually), given the importance of one's state of mind at the moment of death. In order to have a clear, unclouded state of mind at death, which influences one's rebirth, some Buddhists may resist sedatives or palliative care drugs. Additionally, if illness has advanced to an incurable stage, some Buddhist patients may refuse medical treatment.

If possible, the patient should be provided with a quiet space. Some may wish to have a Buddha figure close by and may use a candle or burn incense. If this is not allowed in a specific facility, explain the policy to the patient's family and offer alternatives (e.g., a small lamp placed on the bedside table).

As noted above, for Buddhists, death is not necessarily synonymous with lack of brain function. Many Buddhists believe that a person's consciousness exists in all the organs in addition to the brain, so death occurs when life has left all the organs. A Buddhist spiritual leader may need to be consulted to determine when a patient is dead; this is especially important if the patient or family has consented to organ donation.

Some Buddhists believe that consciousness remains in the body for up to three days after the patient stops breathing. It may be very important to the family that the body not be moved or disturbed until consciousness ceases. This may be impossible in a hospital, in which case hospital policy should be explained to the family and alternatives explored. An alternative could be moving the entire hospital bed into the morgue while leaving the body itself untouched. If the patient takes his/her final breath in the hospital, the body should be left in an empty room, where family and friends may gather to chant and read prayers.

If no fellow Buddhists are present at the time of death, a Buddhist spiritual leader of the same denomination as the patient should be contacted. It is also important to inform a fellow Buddhist of the death (including the time of death) so that proper prayers and rituals to benefit the recently deceased can be conducted.

The body should be wrapped in a plain sheet with no religious symbols. Most Buddhists will not object to a postmortem on religious grounds so long as it does not occur before consciousness has left the body. Once consciousness has ceased, Buddhists may be quite willing to allow postmortems because the body itself is not held in great reverence thereafter. It is important that the health care provider know the individual's beliefs before death so that they are respected. Generally, cremation is preferred.

FOR MORE READING: BUDDHISM

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