



# Buddhist Healthcare Principles for Spiritual Carers

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This pamphlet has been produced by the Buddhist Council of Victoria (BCV) to inform spiritual carers/chaplains about principles underlying Buddhist approaches to healthcare. The first half of this pamphlet describes general Buddhist principles and the second half describes specific Buddhist views on healthcare. This is a guide only. There is a diversity of cultural Buddhist practices so the spiritual care requirements of Buddhist patients/aged care residents will vary.

There are over half a million Buddhists in Australia. According to Australian Census data (2011), Buddhism is the largest non-Christian religion and the third fastest growing religion in Australia. Melbourne is one of the major growth hubs.

### **What Is Buddhism?**

Buddhism is the name given to the path of spiritual enquiry established by Siddhartha Gautama (Shakyamuni Buddha) over 2,500 years ago. The name 'Buddha' means 'One who is awake (enlightened) to reality'. When the Buddha realised the causes of suffering he spent the next forty years teaching the way out of suffering through ethics, meditation, wisdom and compassion.

Buddhism is sometimes referred to as the Middle Way. It encourages a balanced approach to the path of spiritual inquiry between the extremes of austerity and indulgence. Some regard Buddhism as a philosophy, rather than a religion, because it encourages self-investigation and reflection as its main principle.

Buddhism in Australia reflects its diverse origins. From Northern India it spread to Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia and other Himalayan countries. It adapted to customs and rituals found in these geographically and ethnically diverse areas. Australia is home to all the main traditions and branches of Buddhism found in Asia.

The first known Buddhists in Australia were Chinese immigrants during the Australian Gold Rushes in the 1850s. More recent waves of Buddhists in Victoria have come from Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. There has been a significant growth within Australia of Buddhists from all traditions who connect to Buddhism through the practice of meditation. Becoming a Buddhist is a personal choice. Buddhism does not engage or support proselytising.

### **Main Traditions**

There are three main Buddhist traditions: – Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. All Buddhists fall into one of these three traditions. Generally speaking, Theravada was established in the southern Asian countries followed by Mahayana in the northern Asian countries and then Vajrayana in the northern-most countries around the Tibetan and Mongolian plateaus.



## Key Principles of Buddhism

All forms of Buddhism share common core beliefs. The foundation of the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) is the Four Noble Truths: 1) Suffering is part of the human condition 2) There is a cause to this suffering 3) There is an ending to this suffering and 4) This ending of suffering is realised through the Eightfold Noble Path. The Eightfold Noble Path is divided into three foundational trainings: wisdom, ethical conduct and meditation.

Three trainings	Eightfold Noble Path
Wisdom	1. Right understanding
	2. Right intention
Ethical conduct	3. Right speech
	4. Right action
	5. Right livelihood
Meditation	6. Right effort
	7. Right mindfulness
	8. Right concentration

Many committed Buddhists practise five ethical precepts (training principles) in their lives as part of the cultivation of the Eightfold Noble Path. These inform their attitude towards medical and healthcare practices.

The Five Precepts are:

- 1) To refrain from killing
- 2) To refrain from taking that which is not given
- 3) To refrain from misuse of the senses and sexual misconduct
- 4) To refrain from lying or using false or harmful speech
- 5) To refrain from taking intoxicating drink or drugs which cloud the mind

The understanding of *karma* is a distinct aspect of Buddhist philosophy. Karma describes the workings of cause and effect in our lives. Karma is intentional action. A person's current experience is the result of their thoughts, speech and actions (in this life or a previous one) and their future situation (in this life or the next) depends on the thoughts, speech and actions they commit moment-to-moment.

Other key principles include impermanence of all things, the interdependence of all phenomena and the nature of suffering. An understanding of these principles assists Buddhists on their spiritual path.

- ❖ Impermanence refers to the process of change; this includes one's health. For example anything created must eventually dissolve, including this body and mind.
- ❖ Nothing exists independently; everything is dependent on other factors. For example our health is interdependent on a range of factors such as genetics, lifestyle and resources.
- ❖ Suffering is inherent in birth; everything born will experience the sufferings of old age, sickness and death.

In Buddhism there are ordained monastic practitioners - nuns and monks, collectively called Sangha - who hold additional vows to refine their conduct and strengthen their practice. These vows include celibacy. In some traditions, a monastic commitment is usually life-long.

Authentic teachers, from a recognised lineage, play an important role in Buddhism. Teachers are often ordained monastics (monks and nuns), but they can also include senior lay practitioners, depending on the tradition.



## Buddha Image Gallery

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The following images may be of use to Buddhist patients/residents and their families. The image of the Buddha is considered a sacred/respected image by Buddhists. If you wish to dispose of these images please return them to the Buddhist Council of Victoria. Please refer to the BCV website for the most current address.

*With deepest respect, the symbol of the equilateral cross, with its four arms bent at 90°, appears on the chest of the Mahayana Buddha. Is an auspicious, sacred symbol in Buddhist iconography that pre-dates the 20<sup>th</sup> century by over 2000 years. Its appearance on Buddhist images represents the Buddha's heart and Infinite Compassion.*

**All Traditions**



**Theravada**





**Mahayana**



Vajrayana





## Buddhist Views in Healthcare

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It is vital that staff in Victorian hospitals, aged care facilities and other healthcare establishments understand Buddhist views on healthcare in order to better address the healthcare needs of Buddhists.

### *Informed Consent/Disclosure*

For the majority of Buddhist patients/residents full disclosure of their medical conditions and treatment options will enable them to make informed decisions and plan ahead. Buddhists may consult with their spiritual advisors (as well as healthcare staff) in relation to medical decisions. However, staff may at times need to liaise with individual families in order to navigate cultural beliefs that impact disclosure.

### *Reproduction*

In accordance with their precepts Buddhists practise non-harm. This informs their attitudes to living beings. Buddhist will generally refrain from abortion and euthanasia. The use of contraception, such as condoms and the pill, is not contrary to Buddhist precepts. However the use of contraceptive abortifacients can be contrary to Buddhist precepts.

### *Diet*

Many Buddhists are vegetarian (or vegan) based on the precept of non-harming. Others eat meat especially if it has been prepared for them so as not to allow the loss of life to be wasted, or because it has been customary in their country of origin. On special days, such as the Buddha's birth, death and enlightenment, new moon and full moon days, Buddhists may change their diet by fasting or adopting a vegetarian diet.

### *Toilet and Ablutions*

There are no ethical concerns with assisted toilet and showers for lay Buddhists. Ordained monks and nuns, however, may request a same-sex assistant for modesty and reasons related to their vows.

### *Blood Transfusions*

As long as the blood is freely given, such health-giving measures are welcome.

### *Medication*

While there is no rule against the use of medications, Buddhist patients may request limited use of certain pain-relieving or psychological medications that might impact on their clarity of mind. Patients may seek supportive compromises and/or may attempt to use meditation as an alternative to pain medications.

### *Death and Dying*

Buddhist practice is about stabilising and developing the mind. Death is a particularly sensitive transition because states of mind at this time affect rebirth. Therefore, a patient's clarity of consciousness is a particular concern to Buddhists. A number of requests may be made to healthcare providers, around these considerations.

- ❖ The request for a quiet space with minimal chance of interruptions or disturbances. The room may be dark to limit stimulation of the dying person.
- ❖ The lessening or termination of drug regimes that cloud the mind or dull the consciousness of the patient.



- ❖ A request for monks or nuns to chant and provide instructions during a patient's dying stages and post-death. Recordings of sutras, in various languages, are available for use at the time of death.
- ❖ The request to refrain from grieving around the dying person after they have medically passed away.
- ❖ The request to refrain from touching the body immediately after death for as long as possible. This period of time will vary depending on the tradition.

The ceremony of a Buddhist funeral will differ with each tradition. The most common form of a Buddhist funeral is cremation usually seven days after physical death. On the BCV website [www.bcv.org.au](http://www.bcv.org.au) under the Palliative Care tab, you can download a copy of the booklet "Buddhist Care for the Dying" which gives a more detailed picture of the Buddhist approach to care for the dying.

#### *Post Mortems*

In some Buddhist traditions, the dying process is said to last up to three days. Any post-mortem care in this initial period is to be kept to a minimum. Autopsies in some traditions would be requested to occur after the three day period has finished.

#### *Bio-ethical Considerations (including life support and organ donations)*

Buddhists may choose to be a part of an organ donation program. It is understood that this may necessitate the removal of organs as soon as possible post death as opposed to waiting until after the three-day post-death period has finished.

The preservation of life is paramount in Buddhism, but if keeping the body artificially alive by means of life support does not result in brain activity (a sign of a living consciousness) the family may choose to remove life support and allow the body to die naturally.

### **Buddhist Practices in Care Settings**

Buddhist patients/residents may request periods of time for meditation, which may include the chanting of mantras (repeated sacred syllables) aided by the use of prayer beads. Often this is done in front of a sacred image.

The most common image used by Buddhists is an image of the Buddha himself. The image of the Buddha seated in meditation is universal across Buddhist traditions. Other common images include that of a bodhisattva (enlightened compassionate being); for instance, Guan Yin or Quan Am in Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhism, respectively. As images of the Buddha or bodhisattvas are considered sacred to Buddhists, please handle them in a respectful manner (for example, not placing them on the ground).

In the healthcare facility it is helpful to identify which tradition a Buddhist patient or resident comes from and if possible their specific branch (for instance Pure Land or Zen/Chan Mahayana) because it will help identify who is the appropriate spiritual support person for them.



## Further Information

### *Requesting a Buddhist Chaplain*

The Buddhist Council of Victoria has a Buddhist Healthcare Chaplaincy program that facilitates support for Buddhists from all three traditions in hospitals and healthcare settings. Check also to see if your facility has a Buddhist chaplain on staff. Buddhist chaplains are also available on-call via the Buddhist Council of Victoria (BCV) website [www.bcv.org.au](http://www.bcv.org.au). Follow the links to 'Healthcare Chaplaincy – Contact Coordinator'. Hospitals and aged care facilities can also contact the Healthcare Chaplaincy Coordinator to arrange for a trained Buddhist Chaplain to visit their facility on a regular basis.

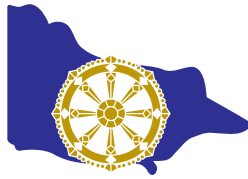
In order to ensure that the right chaplain for your patient is sent to your facility, the following questions will help:

- ❖ What is their Buddhist tradition or school? As an example, are they from the Thai Forest (Theravada), Pure Land (Mahayana) or Nyingma (Vajrayana) tradition?
- ❖ What is the patient's cultural ethnicity? (Sri Lankan, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese etc.)
- ❖ Do they speak English? If not, what language do they speak?
- ❖ Do they specifically require a monk or a nun?
- ❖ Is there a family member (name and contact number) that can assist with appropriate enquiries to ascertain the answers to the above questions?

To find out more please visit our website or email us at [healthcare@bcv.org.au](mailto:healthcare@bcv.org.au)

*May the merit generated in the  
production and use of this pamphlet  
benefit all sentient beings. May they  
be well and happy, well and happy,  
well and happy.*

**Hōjun Futen and Tenzin Wangmo  
on behalf of The Buddhist Council of Victoria  
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