



The **Dharmachakra** or Wheel of Law is one of the most important Buddhist symbols.

BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Buddhism originated in the teaching of Prince Siddhartha Gautama who was born approximately 500 BC in Nepal, near the border of present day India. Through the practice of meditation he became the *Buddha*, the *Enlightened One*.

Buddhists do not normally speak in terms of an Absolute Deity or God but rather emphasise the practice of meditation and *right* behaviours in all areas of life in the process of reaching Nirvana, the enlightened state free of suffering. Particular emphasis is placed on non-violence and the development of love and compassion for all. There are a number of Holy Scriptures within the various traditions of Buddhism.

Six per cent of the world's population is estimated to be Buddhist.

The religion has a clergy of monks, lamas (teachers) and nuns as well as many lay spiritual advisers. There are a number of Buddhist centres supporting different traditions in Ireland.

Summary of Essential Practice Points:

Please refer to the full text of the highlighted points related to the following summary points.

1 **Religious contacts and religious practices:**

There are different traditions of Buddhism in Ireland. Clarify the tradition of Buddhism followed and the name of a spiritual contact. In emergency situations contact the local Buddhist centre or one of the centres named under *Developing a local Buddhist contact*.

2 **Food and the content of medicine:**

Many Buddhists are vegetarian or vegan. Clarify food preferences and inform the person if medicine contains an animal product.

3 **Family dynamics and decision making:**

Some Western Buddhists living in Ireland were raised in Christian families who may not be familiar with Buddhist death-related customs. As much as possible this needs to be taken care of before the moment of death as it is vital to maintain a peaceful environment. If deemed necessary, assistance could be provided to a family, through social work or family intervention, to resolve any issues. The wishes of the person are paramount.

4 **Death-related religious rituals:**

Generally, Buddhist teaching views life and death as a continuum, believing that *consciousness* (the spirit) continues after death and may be reborn. Rituals vary among Buddhist traditions and individual Buddhists may have specific wishes for the time of death. Where possible, discuss individual needs with the person and clarify requirements with a spiritual contact. In an emergency follow these protocols:

- Buddhists from all traditions are likely to prefer

to have a clear state of mind approaching death and may wish to reduce any mind-altering medication.

- If death is imminent the spiritual contact identified by the person should be called so that the appropriate prayer practice can be initiated.
- Preferably a dying Buddhist should be moved to a private area to allow prayers to be conducted in privacy.
- All Buddhist traditions believe that awareness is retained for some period after clinical death. Maintain a calm, stable and compassionate atmosphere around the person before, during and after clinical death to facilitate the *consciousness* (spirit) leaving the body.

5 **Cleaning and touching the body:**

In some traditions specific protocols apply to touching cleaning a body. Unless a spiritual contact advises otherwise, apply these practices to all Buddhists.

- Delay moving and laying out the body for a minimum of four hours to allow for prayers necessary to be conducted.
- Buddhists believe that the spirit should be allowed to leave gently via the crown of the head. Clarify with the spiritual leader if it is necessary for the head to be touched in the traditional way to enable the departure of the spirit. If so, the practice should be attended to before moving or cleaning the body and should be carried out by the spiritual leader or another Buddhist.
- When the body has to be moved it should be done with care and gentleness.
- Some Buddhist teachers have requested that the head is not touched after clinical death

Summary of Essential Practice Points:

Please refer to the full text of the highlighted points related to the following summary points.

by healthcare staff. Do not touch the head unless given permission to do so by a spiritual adviser, and then under guidance given by the adviser or another Buddhist.

- Do not wash the body unless it is essential to do so. Conduct only essential cleaning, for example clean excretions such as blood or excrement. Use as little touch as possible in any cleaning/washing that is done.

6 *Personal and religious items:*

Some Buddhists may wear religious items that must be replaced if removed. Some may also place Prayer Mandalas (sacred symbols drawn on material) on the body after clinical death and these need to be replaced if removed.

7 *Initiation ritual:*

In the case of imminent threat to life of a newborn infant no initiation ritual is necessary.

8 *Foetal, infant and child death:*

The death-related practices described in *Essential Practice Points 4 and 5* need to be followed for children of Buddhists, unless a family or spiritual adviser directs otherwise.

Profile of Buddhist Traditions in Ireland

Census 2006 indicated that Buddhist membership in Ireland increased by just over 67% over the four year period since 2002. The religion registered 6,516 members in 2006.

Buddhism developed in three distinct phases, each emphasising different aspects of the Buddha's teachings. The main branches, all of which have a presence in Ireland, are as follows.

- *Theravada or Southern Buddhism* is described as the oldest tradition and is strongest in southern Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma. There are some centres in Ireland supporting this tradition of Buddhist practice.
- *Mahayana or Eastern Buddhism* developed as a second phase and is found in China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. Chan Buddhism developed in China as a specific tradition within this overall phase of development and spread throughout Asia where it is sometimes called Zen Buddhism. Groups such as *Mindfulness Ireland*, *Soto Zen* and the *Long Van Temple* in Clondalkin, Dublin, are examples of this overall tradition.
- *Tibetan Buddhism* is the best known school in *Vajrayana/Tantric/Northern Buddhism*. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a key leader of Tibetan Buddhism, which builds on the Mahayana tradition and is practised in Tibet, Nepal, Siberia, Mongolia and Northern India. There are centres in several parts of Ireland supporting Tibetan Buddhist practices, some of which are supported by Tibetan Lamas.
- Various forms of *Western Buddhism* are also in existence, some of which may follow or are influenced by an Asian school. An example is the Dublin Buddhist Centre in Dublin.

Buddhist contributors have indicated that there is growing interest in Buddhism in Ireland. There are a number of Buddhist teachers, some of whom are Asian, visiting or living in Ireland. There are also an increasing number of people visiting Buddhist centres to learn about Buddhism. Based on contribution to this section, Buddhist practice in Ireland can be categorised as follows:

- There are a number of Asians living in Ireland who were raised in areas of the world where Buddhism is an established religion including China, Mongolia, Nepal, Tibet and Vietnam. These are continuing their practice in Ireland but may not have contact with Buddhist centres and groups in Ireland.
- Westerners, including those of Irish, UK and American origin, who have become Buddhist are following a specific Buddhist tradition and raising their children as Buddhists. This group usually have contact with Buddhist groups and are likely to wish to avail of Buddhist practices when ill or near death.
- A number of people are partaking in Buddhist practices and blending them with their own religious beliefs, often Christianity. Buddhist teachers, as a general principle, encourage people to learn from Buddhism without converting. As a result many of this group may not wish to avail of Buddhist practices in healthcare settings.

Care of the ill

Beliefs about the treatment of illness

Buddhist traditions emphasise personal responsibility for all of one's actions and as a result a Buddhist will wish to do all that is necessary to maintain health through positive means. They also emphasise the spiritual aspect and many may use prayer and psychosomatic techniques such as meditation as preferred options for pain relief.

Religious contacts and religious practices

Essential Practice Point

1

- There are followers of all Buddhist traditions in Ireland (see the *Profile of Buddhism in Ireland* heading above for further information). Many Buddhists receive spiritual support from spiritual advisers including teachers, monks, nuns and in some cases a community member. The setting will need to clarify the tradition of Buddhism followed and the name of a spiritual contact.
- In emergency situations where the person has not been able to identify a spiritual adviser contact the local Buddhist centre or one of the centres named under *Developing a local contact*. Even if the centre is not from the person's tradition they are likely to be willing to assist.
- Buddhists may wish to have a small altar/shrine beside their bed or in their room. The altar/shrine may contain religious symbols such as a small statue of the Buddha, religious images and objects, candles (can be unlit) and incense (can be unlit).
- Some Buddhists may use *prayer mandalas* (sacred symbols drawn on material) at the bedside.

Food and the content of medicine

Essential Practice Point

2

- Many Buddhists are vegetarian or vegan. Food needs should be discussed with the person and should meet recognised vegetarian or vegan standards.
- If medicines contain animal products the person should be informed so that they can make an informed choice.

Family dynamics and decision making

Essential Practice Point

3

Some Western Buddhists living in Ireland were raised in Christian families. The family may not be familiar with Buddhist death-related customs, some of which are summarised in *Essential Practice points 4 and 5* below. As much as possible this needs to be taken care of before the moment of death as it is vital to maintain a peaceful environment. If deemed necessary the healthcare setting could provide assistance to a family, through social work or family intervention, to resolve any issues.

Here, as in other cases, the wishes of the person are paramount.

Blood Transfusion and Organ Transplantation

The approach to blood transfusions and organ transplantation varies depending on the tradition of Buddhism that is being followed. Some will be happy to accept the procedures, seeing them as an act of kindness. Others may be concerned about the spiritual consequences of accepting blood and

organs from an unknown source and may first wish to have spiritual guidance. Where the person has not left instructions, it is best to consult a family member or the spiritual contact in these situations.

Care of the Dying

Death-related religious rituals

Essential Practice Point

4

Generally, Buddhist teaching views life and death as a continuum, believing that *consciousness* (the spirit) continues after death and may be reborn. Death can be an opportunity for liberation from the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

Rituals and in some cases precise beliefs surrounding death vary among Buddhist traditions. Tibetan Buddhism has defined practices and protocols that should be followed in times of death. For example, special prayers are said before death, during the dying process and for several days after death. The Mahayana (Chan/Zen, etc.) and the Western Buddhist approaches are relatively less defined; in these traditions prayers are held during the dying process, while the stages at which prayers are held and the length of these prayers vary.

In addition, individual Buddhists, even within the same tradition, may have specific wishes for the time of death, depending on their level of practice.

Tibetan teachers have provided specific clarification and protocols for this section and clarification has been given for other traditions based on feedback received.

Where possible, discuss individual needs with the person and clarify requirements with a spiritual contact. In an emergency follow these protocols:

- Buddhists from all traditions are likely to prefer to have a clear state of mind approaching death. As part of their preparation for death, the person may wish to reduce medication that clouds the mind and will want to be fully involved and consulted at all stages.
- Prayer and meditation are an important support for a Buddhist who is sick or dying. If death is imminent the spiritual contact identified by the person should be called so that the appropriate prayer practice can be initiated.
- Preferably a dying Buddhist should be moved to a private area to allow prayers to be conducted in privacy.
- All Buddhist traditions believe that awareness is retained for some period after clinical death. In the Tibetan tradition awareness may be retained for up to three days. The manner in which the body is treated is very important so that the spirit is allowed to leave correctly. In all circumstances maintain a calm, stable and compassionate atmosphere around the person before, during and after clinical death. Buddhists consider this highly important in facilitating the *consciousness* (the spirit) to leave the body.
- Friends and family may want to sit by the person to pray immediately after death, so facilitating this will be very much appreciated.

Cleaning and touching the body

Essential Practice Point

5

- Delay moving and laying out the body for as long as possible. The minimum should be at least four hours to allow for prayers necessary to be conducted.

- Buddhists believe that the spirit should be allowed to leave gently via the crown of the head. In some traditions they facilitate the departure of the spirit by tapping the crown of the head in a specific way and in a very specific frame of mind. Clarify with the spiritual leader if this practice is necessary and if so it should be attended to before moving the body and before any cleaning is conducted. The practice should be carried out by the spiritual leader or another Buddhist.
- When the body has to be moved it should be done with care and gentleness.
- Some Buddhist teachers have requested that the head of a Buddhist is not touched at any time during the post clinical death process by healthcare staff. A healthcare worker not touch the head at any time unless given permission to do so by a spiritual adviser, and then under guidance given by the adviser or another Buddhist.
- Do not wash the body unless it is essential to do so. Conduct only essential cleaning, for example clean excretions such as blood or excrement. Use as little touch as possible in any cleaning/washing that is done.

Postmortem requirements

Buddhists are likely to request that a postmortem be carried out only if required on compelling medical or legal grounds. In such circumstances a postmortem should be delayed until awareness has left the body. Unless directed otherwise by a spiritual adviser, a postmortem should be delayed for a minimum of four hours and preferably for three and a half days.

Interment ritual

Cremation or burial takes place after a period of time. In the Tibetan tradition interment takes place after three and a half days while the time varies across other traditions.

Bereavement

There will be a period of saying prayers, often throughout the day and night, in most Buddhist traditions. The traditional Tibetan practice involves a forty-nine day prayer ritual during which the spirit moves through the afterlife and decisions are made regarding rebirth.

Religious Items and Symbols

Personal and religious items

In some Buddhist traditions followers wear religious items including amulets (items for protection), blessed items, jewels, etc.

Essential Practice Point

6

In the Tibetan and other traditions *prayer mandalas* (sacred symbols drawn on material) may be placed on the body after death by the spiritual leader or community. If prayer mandalas have been placed on the body, replace them after putting the deceased in the coffin.

Use of religious symbols

Buddhists use a variety of religious symbols including statues of the Buddha, candles and incense. The family or community can supply these items; alternatively healthcare settings could consult with a local Buddhist centre and establish basic items to be held for use by Buddhists as necessary.

It is not appropriate to display Christian symbols in the mortuary areas when a Buddhist family/ community is using the facility.

Additional Notes on Maternity and Paediatric Care

The following applies to all Buddhist traditions.

Initiation ritual

Essential Practice Point

7

- There is no initiation ritual into Buddhism for a newborn infant; in the case of imminent threat to life of a newborn infant no initiation ritual is necessary.
- Some Buddhist traditions have initiation rituals, which are usually conferred on those who are choosing Buddhism as their specific spiritual path.

Foetal, infant and child death

Buddhist teaching considers life to be present from the moment of conception. Hence in cases of miscarriage and stillbirth Buddhists are likely to be respectful of the way the miscarried embryo/foetus is treated, irrespective of the stage of development. Parents are free to decide the course of action they wish to take.

Essential practice point

8

A child of a Buddhist is generally considered to also be a Buddhist until the child decides on their own path in adulthood. The death-related practices

described in *Essential Practice Points 4 and 5* need to be followed for children of Buddhists, unless a family or spiritual adviser directs otherwise.

Memento of a deceased child

It is advised to check with the family whether they wish to have a memento of a deceased child and if so if they might wish to take the memento themselves, particularly in light of requirements about not touching a deceased Buddhist.

Developing a Local Buddhist Contact

Centres and groups representing various traditions of Buddhism are operating in Ireland. These may be accessed for information purposes and may be able to assist if an intervention is necessary for a person who indicates that they are Buddhist.

Tibetan Buddhism:

Rigpa Ireland, which works under the guidance of Soygal Rinpoche, author of the Tibetan *Book of Living and Dying*, has centres in Athlone, Cork, Dublin and Limerick. Contact details for all centres can be found at www.rigpa.ie

There is also Dzogchen Beara Retreat Centre, West Cork, which at the time of writing was developing a Spiritual Care Centre in Beara, West Cork.

Tel: 027 73032

Email: info@dzogchenbeara.org

Website: www.dzogchenbeara.org

Jampa Ling Buddhist Centre, Owendoon House, Bawnboy, Co. Cavan.

Resident Lama: Venerable Panchen Otrul Rinpoche

Tel: (049) 9523448

Email: jampaling@eircom.net

Website: www.jampaling.org

Kagyu Samye Dzong Buddhist Centre, 58 Inchicore Road, Kilmainham, Dublin 8.

Tel: (01) 4537427

Website: www.buddhism.ie/KSD/mainframe.htm

Western Buddhism:

Dublin Buddhist Centre, Liberty Corner, 5 James Joyce Street, Dublin 1.

Tel: (01) 817 8933

Website: www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org

Theravada Buddhism:

Sunyata Retreat Centre, Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare

Tel: (061) 067-073

Website: www.sunyatacentre.com

Mahayana and Zen Buddhism:

Mindfulness Ireland is a collection of group working under the guidance of Zen Master Thick Nhat Hann from Vietnam. Contact details for groups based in Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Sligo and Wicklow is available at a sub-site of the main website www.mindfulness-ireland.org/Sanghas_in_Ireland.html

Contributors

Representative of the various traditions of Buddhism present in Ireland provided information, clarification and guidance for this section. Spiritual advisers from two Tibetan Buddhist centres worked more closely with us to clarify protocols for specific areas of care, in particular death-related practices. These were:

- Members of Dzogchen Beara Spiritual Care Team, who work under the guidance of Tibetan Lama Venerable Soygal Rinpoche
- Tibetan Lama Venerable Panchen Otrul Rinpoche and Venerable Margery Cross, Jampa Ling Buddhist Centre

Buddhist representatives who provided information and clarification in relation to their own tradition(s) of Buddhism were:

- Mr Sean Boland, Dublin Buddhist Centre (Western Buddhism)
- Mr Bart Gruzalski, Ph.D., Sunyata Retreat Centre (Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism)
- Ms Fiona Wilson, Mindfulness Ireland, which is run under the guidance of Zen Master Thick Nhat Hann from Vietnam (Zen Buddhism)
- Mr Malcolm McClancy, Rigpa Ireland (Tibetan Buddhism and general development of Buddhism in Ireland)
- Ms Ani Thondru, Kagyu Samye Dzong Buddhist Centre, Dublin (Tibetan Buddhism). Ms Thondru provided us with guidelines on death-related processes in Buddhism that were produced by Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland, which are referenced in the bibliography.