CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP
in Buddhist-Christian Funerals

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BUDDHISM 101

Buddhism is a nontheistic religion or philosophy that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices based on the teachings of Siddhartha Guatama Buddha, commonly known as the Buddha ("the awakened one").

Siddhartha Guatama was born in the sixth century B.C.E in northern India, the son of a king in what is now Nepal. The king was warned by a sage his son would grow up to become either a great king or a religious ascetic. Not wanting to take the chance the latter would happen for his son, the king confined him to their home. When he grew up Siddhartha ran away, only to be shocked when he saw the reality outside his childhood protection. The first man he saw was old and weak; the second was ill and diseased; and the third was dead. To Siddhartha they represented the impermanence in all forms of earthy existence. He also saw a religious ascetic, who represented the possibility of a solution to these human frailties. He wandered in search of peace and tried many things, but finally he came to the Tree of Enlightenment (The Bodhi Tree) and stayed there for several days. Eventually, he became a Buddha, or one who is enlightened and his teaching on the path to enlightenment form the basis for Buddhism.

The Four Noble Truths (having to do with suffering and release from it) and the Eightfold Path (having to do with correct belief and action) comprise the Buddha’s insights into the essential ways of life and how to achieve spiritual liberation. Though schools vary on exactly how those are interpreted, one consistent belief held by Buddhists is the lack of a creator deity. The foundations of Buddhist tradition are the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Teachings (dharma) and the Community (sangha). Taking "refuge in the triple gem" is a traditional commitment to being on the Buddhist path. Other practices may include: following ethical precepts, supporting a monastic community, becoming a monk, development of a meditation practice, mindfulness and devotional practices.

Today there are over 3.5 million adherents of Buddhism in the United States. While many of them bring immigrant culture to Buddhism, there is a growing number of U.S.-born Buddhists. They are bringing a new and developing culture to the religion.
WHAT CHRISTIAN CLERGY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BUDDHIST FUNERALS

Buddhist adherents believe each individual passes through many incarnations until they are liberated from worldly illusions and desires.

A person enters a new incarnation immediately after death. The resulting being is not fully realized for nine months, so a new incarnation can be interpreted as entering the womb of a woman. When they are through with the process of rebirth, they then enter nirvana, Sanskrit for “a blowing out as of a flame.”

It is usually considered inappropriate to communicate with the bereaved before the funeral. The bereaved family usually recommends a gift to a specific charity to which donations of between $5 and $100 can be sent. It is not appropriate to send food.

For most funerals, Buddhist monks are invited to perform the last rites. Then, close relatives will offer a white cloth to the monks. They will recite a stanza reminding attendees of the impermanent and transient nature of all things. Finally, a jug of water is emptied into a bowl until it overflows, while another stanza is recited with thoughts of goodwill toward the deceased.

Some Buddhist funerals (for example, those based in a Japanese culture) will have an eulogy and prayers at a funeral home, resembling a Christian funeral and lasting about an hour and fifteen minutes.
These services will take place within a week of the person’s death at a funeral home and be officiated by a minister or priest. However, some traditions (particularly Cambodian, Thai and Ceylonese) may have up to three ceremonies, each of about forty-five minutes. The first, held within two days of the death, will be led by monks at the home of the deceased. The second, held within two to five days of the death, will be led by monks at a funeral home. And, the third, seven days after the death, will be held after the burial or cremation either at the home or at the temple. This last ceremony, called a "merit transference," is designed to generate good energy for the deceased in his or her new incarnation. There are three components of a Buddhist funeral: a time of sharing, the practice of good conduct, and the developing of a calm mind through meditation. At the funeral service there may be chairs available or the expectation may be to sit on meditation cushions. Expect an open casket; it is appropriate to vow slightly toward the body as a sign of appreciation during the viewing. All Buddhist traditions will use the Sutras in the ceremonies. These are the collected sayings of the Buddha. Guests may attend the interment or cremation if desired. At the graveside the body is committed to the ground and prayers are recited.

It is appropriate to visit the home of the bereaved after the funeral. Food will be served. Since Buddhists hold their ancestors in very high regard, there is often a time of mourning, often 49 days. This is a time for the ancestor spirit to be given time to settle. After this time, there is often another memorial service. All traditions have a "merit transference" ceremony in order to continue to generate good energy for the deceased in his or her new incarnation. Vegetarian food will be served and sharing will be expected.
We have described here very general information about Buddhism in North America. It is always a good idea to talk with the other officiant and to know whether the tradition will be in the Japanese style or the Cambodian, Thai or Ceylonese style. It is also important to remember many Buddhists have traveled to North America from all over the world, especially Asia. They may have brought with them their own cultural contexts. If you have any questions, make sure you ask.
Resources for Deeper Study

The Council of Bishops Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships, publisher of this brochure, wishes to acknowledge the contents are intended as a guide and have been developed from a general North American context. United Methodists of other cultural contexts are encouraged to volunteer to create a similar resource applicable specifically for them.

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Buddhist Churches of America: 415-776-5600; www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.org

The Plum Village, www.plumvillage.org


