



CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

in Buddhist-Christian Weddings

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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 Eight-fold 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 WEDDINGS

Adherents of Buddhism consider marriage a secular affair and as such there is no standard Buddhist marriage ceremony in North America.

Sometimes a Buddhist wedding may resemble a traditional Protestant Christian ceremony. Its purpose is to remind those present of the essential Buddhist principle of non-harmfulness to all life, and the readings will usually refer to kindness and compassion. Attire can range from casual to formal, depending on the desire of the couple. Usually, the ceremony will take place either in the temple or outside, and no head cover is required in either place. Guests should be aware some temples do not have chairs and sitting on meditation cushions on the floor may be a possibility. Gifts are not normally expected. A priest, monk or minister may officiate. Depending on the particular Buddhist denomination that person's title will be: Reverend, Lama or Roshi.

A reception may follow the ceremony either in the temple's reception area or at another site. Light food may be served, but it will never be meat and usually there will be no alcohol. The reception usually lasts about an hour. It is appropriate to greet the newlywed couple with your congratulations.

Finally, while Buddhists consider the marriage ceremony as civil, often the couple will obtain a blessing from monks at the local temple after the ceremony and reception are completed.



CULTURAL CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT

We have described here very general information about Buddhism in North America. It is always a good idea to talk with the couple getting married directly about their particular cultural expectations and to talk with the person who may also participating in the ceremony. It is also important to remember that some Buddhists have traveled to North America from all over the world, particularly Asia. They may have brought with them their own cultural context. If you have 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.

Gratitude is given for Bishop Hee-Soo Jung, United Methodist Bishop of the Wisconsin Annual Conference, for his guidance and wisdom.

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

The Plum Village, www.plumvillage.org

The Plum Chanting and Recitation Book, Tich Nhat Hanh, Berkeley, CA:
Parallax Press, 2000

Old Path White Cloud: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha,
Tich Nhat Hanh, Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991.

The Perfect Stranger's Guide to Wedding Ceremonies, Edited by Stuart M. Matlins; Skylight Paths Publishing, 2000.

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