

Culture and Religion

Information Sheet



Buddhism

Buddhist Society of Western Australia

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Buddhism

Introduction

Western Australia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural society. Religious freedom and mutual respect for different religions is an integral part of our shared culture and is an important underlying principle of multiculturalism and democracy.

Service providers who recognise, value and promote cultural and religious diversity can address more fully the needs of their clients. Respecting the roles of religion in various cultures is part of courteous, ethical and professional behaviour, which promotes a just and equitable society.

This Information Sheet aims to raise awareness and understanding of Buddhist religious and cultural practices to assist service providers in the government and non-profit community sectors in improving service delivery.

The variations in practice among Buddhists from different countries are often shaped by cultural rather than religious factors.

Background and Origins

Siddhattha Gotama was born as a prince in what is now Southern Nepal over 2500 years ago. Seeing that life's pleasures fade quickly, he set out in search of lasting happiness. After six years of mainly solitary practice committed to cultivating and purifying the mind, he discovered the timeless truth of existence and realised enlightenment: the complete cessation of greed, hatred and delusion, which are at the root of all discontent deep within the mind.

Hence forth known as the Buddha, he devoted the remaining 45 years of his life to teaching and helping others to attain the same sublime happiness of liberation that he had discovered.

Today, two main strands of Buddhism are recognised:

1. Theravada Buddhism, the main religion of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos but also prevalent in Malaysia, Singapore and Nepal; and
2. Mahayana Buddhism, the main religion of Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam and Japan but also prevalent in China, Malaysia, Singapore and Nepal.

Key Beliefs

The following are the key Buddhist beliefs:

- All Buddhists believe in reincarnation. This belief shapes their attitude to life and death, making them more at ease with a premature or unexpected death of a loved one and more accepting of their own death when it is imminent. Carers should bear in mind that such stoicism in the face of tragedy comes from their religious beliefs and not from fear or denial.
- Buddhists also believe in the Law of Karma, which explains that one's own happiness or suffering, success or failure, health or illness, and so on, is caused by one's own actions (karma means action), bodily or verbal or mental. Karma is not fatalism, since Buddhists realise that karma is "work-in-progress" and even now they generate the causes for future prosperity or failure. Thus, in times of distress, Buddhists will seek to do good karma to alleviate any unpleasantness.

Buddhism

- Buddhism is not a God-centred faith. Thus Buddhists do not worship, nor surrender their fate to a divine being. However the majority of Buddhists will have statues of the Buddha, Kuan Yin (The Goddess of Mercy), Maitreya (the future Buddha) and other icons in their temples and houses, and pray in front of them for favours. Though these images are meant to be merely images of reflection, to generate inspiration, they are regularly used as a focus for aspirations, ie praying. Also, Buddhists accept the truths of science, such as evolution, the 'Big Bang', genetics and so on.
- Buddhists place an uncommon emphasis on compassion. Since Buddhism holds that one can be reborn from the animal, ghost, heaven or lower realms, and that one can also reincarnate back into those realms (as well as back to the human realm), Buddhists show extraordinary compassion to animals and even insects. Their strong focus on compassion leads Buddhists to be totally accepting of the gay and lesbian community and their lifestyle. In practice, compassion takes the form of not doing anything that harms another or oneself, but instead strives to bring happiness to all beings, including oneself. This leads on to the basic moral conduct for Buddhists, called the Five Precepts.
- Buddhists try to live by the **Five Precepts** of harmlessness. However, if they fail, they are still fully accepted within the Buddhist community. The Five Precepts are strongly encouraged. They are:
 1. Refraining from intentionally killing any living being;
 2. Refraining from any form of stealing;
 3. Refraining from sexual misconduct, in particular from committing adultery;
 4. Refraining from any form of lying; and
 5. Refraining from taking alcohol and non-medicinal drugs.

Demographics

Between the 2001 and 2006 Census, the number of people in Australia who identified themselves as Buddhist had increased to 418,758, an increase of 60,945 or 17 per cent. According to the 2006 Census, there were 34,357 people affiliated with Buddhism in Western Australia, an increase of 4,394 persons or 14.7 per cent compared to the previous census.

Greeting

The following sensitivity needs to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- It is inappropriate for some Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns to shake hands with members of the opposite sex.
- A common Buddhist way of greeting is to put the palms of the hands together and raise them to the chin.
- Most Australian Buddhists, especially Caucasians, will simply shake your hand and say g'day.

Buddhism

Names and Titles

- Buddhist monks and nuns can be addressed as 'Venerable', 'Roshi', 'Ajahn', 'Master', 'Bhante; or 'Sister', depending on their tradition. Buddhist clergy generally prefer to laugh at any mistakes in protocol and rarely take offence.

Seating

The following sensitivity needs to be observed in seating arrangements for interview purposes or hosting official functions:

- The rules for some Buddhist monks and nuns do not allow them to be alone with the opposite sex. Lay Buddhists of both genders have no such requirements.

Dress and Appearance

The following dress codes apply:

- Buddhist monks shave their heads and wear a robe that is usually brown/tan, orange, red, maroon, grey or black. Buddhist nuns also shave their heads and wear a robe which is usually brown, maroon, white, grey or pink.
- Lay Buddhists follow the Australian dress code and are indistinguishable from the majority.
- The appropriate dress and etiquette for visiting a Buddhist temple or monastery is similar to that you would observe in any religious place; which is to dress and behave modestly.

Body Language and Behaviour

Non-verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision. Non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another.

- On entering a temple or monastic building, and in many cases a Buddhist home, shoes and any head covering should be removed.
- At monasteries, temples and shrines in homes, Buddhists will usually bow three times before a statue of the Buddha, as a means of paying respect to the example of the Buddha, to his teachings, and to the Enlightened monks and nuns. Non-Buddhists are not expected to bow.
- Lay Buddhists will often bow as a mark of respect to monks, nuns, and in some cultures to elders.
- Some Buddhist monks and nuns are generally not allowed to come into direct physical contact with members of the opposite gender.
- Police, soldiers or anyone else, should not carry weapons into a Buddhist temple or monastery.
- In some traditions pointing the feet towards a statue of the Buddha, a shrine, monks, nuns, or people in general, is considered very impolite.
- Touching the head of a person is also impolite. The only exceptions relate to special circumstances, such as during medical treatment, in which permission should be sought and will readily be granted.

Buddhism

Food, Drink and Fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, as a matter of good practice, always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat on separate trays. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function. The following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- Traditions vary over whether or not the Buddha prohibited the eating of meat. Because the Buddhist code of virtue includes compassion to animals, many Buddhists are vegetarian, however they do not take offence at others eating meat.
- Some monks and nuns eat meat and others are vegetarian.
- Some Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people, do not eat in the period from noon until the dawn of the next day.

Religious Festivals and Days of Significance

The following key religious festivals and significant cultural and religious days are celebrated:

- The Buddhist 'Uposatha' is observed roughly every seven to eight days (on the waning, new, waxing and full moon days). It is a common day for visiting a monastery.
- Vesak Day (Vasaka Puja) is the full moon of May. It commemorates the birth, Enlightenment, and final passing away of the Buddha. It is the major Buddhist festival of the year.
- The Rains Retreat (Vassavassa, or Vassa) is approximately from the full moon of July to the full moon of October. During this time Theravada monks and nuns devote more time to meditation and study and do not travel for long from their monastery.
- The Kathina Ceremony is sometime in October/November (depending on individual monasteries). Monastic supplies are offered following the monks' three-month annual retreat.

Language and Communication

Language and communication issues include:

- It is Western Australian Government policy to provide competent interpreting and translating services to clients who are unable to communicate effectively in spoken or written English.
- Government agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone 131450.
- Some Asian Buddhists are reluctant to make contradictions, disagree or refuse requests directly, as this would be considered impolite. 'No' may be expressed or hinted at indirectly.
- For the Asian Buddhist, direct public criticism may lead to 'loss of face'. For them, this is a state of severe humiliation, loss of reputation and emotional upheaval.

Buddhism

Family and Marriage

The differing family characteristics of different religious groups should be appreciated. These include:

- Most Buddhist monks and nuns do not perform marriage ceremonies but often give a blessing after the civil ceremony.
- In some Buddhist cultures, the most senior male is considered the head of the family, though often the eldest son will represent the family in any discussions or interviews.

Medical

- Where possible, doctors, nurses, and other medical service providers treating Buddhist monks or nuns should be of the same gender.
- The family of a sick Buddhist in hospital will often be very keen to attend on their sick relative.
- Sick Buddhists in hospital may also request a visit from a monk or nun, but in some Buddhist cultures this is only for the terminally ill.

Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant and important for all religious communities. Some sensitivities include:

- A Buddhist would normally do their best to help a dying person attain a good rebirth by ensuring that the quality of their final moment of consciousness is as peaceful and free of fear as possible (see above, 'Key Beliefs'). This is helped if visitors stay serene and calm and help the dying person recollect their good actions. A calm and peaceful environment is helpful.
- Often a dying Buddhist will ask to see a Buddhist monk or nun of their own tradition to give him or her encouragement, spiritual support and sometimes chanting of Buddhist scriptures or blessings.
- Dying Buddhists may request that all pain killing or other drugs, which impair clarity of mind, be withdrawn shortly before death.
- Buddhists would usually have no objection to an autopsy, though most Buddhists would prefer that the body be left in an undisturbed state for as long as possible. Mahayana Buddhists prefer the body to be left untouched for up to eight hours while Tibetan Buddhists usually wish it to be undisturbed for three days.
- After a Buddhist has died, his or her relatives will often perform acts of generosity or religious observance in their name and dedicate the power of that goodness to the well being of the deceased.
- Buddhism does not prescribe any particular preparation of the corpse or type of funeral so this will vary depending on cultural traditions. Cremation is common, though Chinese Buddhists prefer burial. Sometimes the ashes of the deceased are kept or enshrined in a Buddhist temple or monastery.
- Buddhist funeral services are normally performed by Buddhist monks or nuns.

Buddhism

Counselling/interviews

- Refer to the sections on 'Body Language and Behaviour', 'Language and Communication' and 'Seating'.
- Buddhist monks, nuns and some lay spiritual leaders are highly regarded by their communities and are often called upon for counselling and advice.

Further Enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Buddhist Society of WA with the support of the Office of Multicultural Interests. For further information please contact the Buddhist Society of WA on telephone 9345 1711.

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