

BUDDHIST MEDITATION CHAPLAINCY: SPIRITUAL CARE FOR DEATH



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ABSTRACT

Chaplaincy is a form of serving others to relieve suffering. Buddhist chaplains volunteer to go into hospitals, schools, prison and orphanage on a periodic basis. Each chaplain does this as a form of our own Buddhist practice - method of insight meditation and a form of Dharma in Action. Buddhist chaplains propose emotional and spiritual support, loving-kindness and compassion. Buddhist chaplains bring a caring presence and willingness to listen, especially during times of difficulty and depression. Buddhist Chaplaincy has ordained monastic chaplains, as well as lay people with careers in addition to retirees. Death has central roles in Theravada Buddhism, as we do in most Buddhist traditions. They are important catalysts for engaging in Buddhist practice and are frequently used as themes of reflection to deepen one's practice. In offering spiritual care to Theravada Buddhists one should be prepared to respond to people's needs and concerns related to death.

Keywords: Buddhist meditation, Chaplaincy, Spiritual care, Death.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this short article is to examine Buddhist Chaplain requires a mature outlook and a caring and empathetic nature with good communications skills. It is also strongly recommended that the candidate is a regular meditation practitioner. There are so many kinds of chaplain, such as hospital chaplaincy, school chaplaincy, prison chaplaincy and orphanage chaplaincy in the Buddhist traditions. Hospital Chaplains¹ need to be able to cope with the demanding tasks of giving comfort to patients in the critical stages of their life.

Prison chaplaincies² need an ability to relate in a piratical manner that can be understood by inmates of different Background. Buddhist traditions have varied customs around dying and death, an enduring understanding in all these traditions is that death is not a final end. For people who are not fully enlightened rebirth follows death. For those individuals who are fully awakened it is considered impossible to make any assertion what happens after death, including the idea that they are or are not reborn. However, even thought Buddhist traditions share in the idea of rebirth, there are differences among some of the traditions in how they understand the various destinations and forms of rebirth a person might take.

There are also differences within traditions in how much emphasis or importance is placed on the notion of rebirth. The notion of rebirth often brings much so lace to those who are distressed by the alternative. However, there are many people for whom the idea of rebirth is itself distressing as they imagine some of the unfortunate circumstances they may be headed for.

In classic Indian Buddhism being stuck in an endless cycle of birth, death³ and rebirth is considered undesirable and the ultimate direction of Buddhist practice is to be released from this cycle. It is understood that the fuel for further rebirth is clinging and once this fuel has been fully dissolved, death will not lead to further rebirth. Whether one

¹A hospital chaplain is a clergy member ordained to assist residents in their religious and spiritual pursuits. Chaplains are usually required to have a degree in counseling, theology, or another major pertinent to their line of work, (http://study.com/articles/Hospital_Chaplain)

²The role of prison chaplains is to meet the religious needs of inmates. (**Religion prison-A 50-state survey of prison chaplains**), March 22, 2012.

³A III, 303.

believes in the literal idea of rebirth or not, all Buddhists understand that clinging also fuels the constant cycle of suffering that is born and dies in our minds each unliberated moment.

The work of awakening and becoming free of these momentary cycles is the same work as becoming free from the cycles of rebirth. For many Buddhist practitioners, believing in rebirth over lifetimes is a great motivator for their practice. For some people this belief can lead to complacency if they put off practicing until a future lifetime. Whether one believes in rebirth or not, dying is a time when we are confronted with life's deepest truths. To be able to learn and be transformed by these truths is one of the ultimate tasks of Buddhist practice.

CHAPLAIN AND THE ARRANGING FOR DEATH

A chaplaincy is a professional who provide spiritual care to patients who experience spiritual and emotional pains.⁴ In all circumstances connected to death⁵ and dying, the most important offering of the Buddhist chaplain are their own equanimity and lack of conflict regarding death. Engaging in reflections and practices that arrange one for death is perhaps the most important preparation the chaplain needs to be ready to respond wisely and compassionately to people facing issues of death and dying. An important role of Buddhist chaplains⁶ is to encourage people to consider the reality of death. Theravada Buddhism encourages people to prepare for death. This arranging is considered part of living a mindful, conscientious life. Mindfulness is defined as the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose in the present moment without judgment.⁷ Arranging helps make the circumstance of dying easier for everyone concerned.

There are both practical and spiritual aspects to such readiness. To have our affairs in order simplifies our own life when our death approaches and so it is easier to

⁴Fuminobu Komura, **Mindfulness in Chaplaincy: From the Perspective of a Buddhist Priest**, (Chaplain Resident, Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA),2017.

⁵A III, 303.

⁶BuddhistChaplains.org is dedicated to developing the field of Buddhist spiritual care. <http://www.buddhistchaplains.org>.

⁷Kabat-Zinn, John. **Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness**. (New York: Bantam Book), 2013.

focus on what is most important at this time. To be spiritually and emotionally prepared for our death optimizes the chances that we can use the period of dying for its unparalleled opportunity for Buddhist practice. When appropriate, chaplains should encourage people to be prepared for their death. In a sense, all Buddhist practice prepares a person to die. People who meditate regularly will generally have less fear of death than people who don't. They will have developed some of the inner qualities that help bring balance and equanimity in the face of death. With the development of concentration, the mind tends to remain more balanced and less reactive than a mind without this stabilizing force.

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION AND CHAPLAIN

The development of mindfulness mediators⁸ have a deep appreciation of moment to moment impermanence. This can also provide the trust or confidence to go along with the letting go process that dying is. Because it helps us to be present for what is happening without being caught by aversion, desire or doubt, the best single preparation for death is mindfulness meditation. Also, the insights of mindfulness practice are the springboards to liberation.

The ability to practice mindfulness on one's deathbed is considered one of the most opportune times for liberation. In addition, Buddhism encourages people to take the time to actually contemplate the topic of death. Some teachers instruct practitioners to maintain death as a constant companion. There are other benefits from *marananusati*⁹ (contemplation of death) beyond its value in preparing for death. For example, it can help keep one's priorities straight and it can be a catalyst for getting serious about one's spiritual practice. In fact, Milarepa, the great Tibetan yogi said, "Without mindfulness of death, whatever Dharma practice you take up will be merely superficial."¹⁰

Confronting death directly also allows us to work through our fear, aversion and confusion around death. Done well, the contemplation of death can help bring a deep sense of peace and well being. In the discourses of the Buddha, the contemplation of death is integrated with the overall development of mindfulness. The *Sutta* on the Four Foundations

⁸**M I**, 55.

⁹**A VI**, 19.

¹⁰<https://quotefancy.com/quote/1576308/Milarepa-In-brief-without-being-mindful-of-death-whatever-Dharma>.

of Mindfulness lists nine different contemplations on a corpse at different stages of decay¹¹. It is not clear in this discourse whether one is to look at an actual corpse or one is to imagine a corpse. In either case, one is to remind oneself that as this corpse has the nature to decay, so one's own body has the nature to decay as well. Since nowadays bodies are not allowed to decay in charnel grounds, some people have adapted this practice to one of visiting hospitals or morgues where one might have permission to sit with a corpse. Sometimes people will use a photo of a dead person as a focus of this contemplation. Classically, in Theravada Buddhism, mediators are encouraged to practice reflecting on the "four protections"¹² which are said to support the deepening of meditation practice. These four are the contemplation of the qualities of the Buddha to protect us from doubt and discouragement, the practice of loving-kindness for anger, contemplating the unappetizing aspects of the body to calm desire, especially sexual desire, and the contemplation of death as a protection from heedlessness and laziness.

Larry Rosenberg¹³ recommends practicing these reflections for about 20 minutes a day after first calming the mind through breath meditation. Sometimes the practice can simply entail repeating one of the contemplations and then exploring the feeling, thoughts and body sensations that arise. The various mindfulness practices around death are not meant to be morbid or distressing contemplations. While these practices have been Buddhist meditations since ancient times, they are perhaps particularly important in our modern times where death and dying usually happen privately, beyond the view of regular daily life. Buddhism encourages us to see death as a natural occurrence. Being prepared to die also entails healing any relationships with conflict or unfinished business.

Hopefully, relationships are dealt with as soon as possible, well before an impending death. Since death can arrive unexpectedly, it is important not to delay resolving our difficulties with others. Buddhist resources for this work include loving-kindness and forgiveness practices, confession and apologies where needed, and the practices of honesty, ethics and generosity. Even if the other party in a conflict does not want reconciliation, it is still possible to do the inner work of releasing one's own resentment, anger or fear. It is hard to die peacefully if we die with resentments or regrets.

¹¹ **MN III**, p.88.

¹² **Mil**, 7.4:10.

¹³ Insight Meditation Center Newburyport, 443 Middle Street, West Newbury, MA: 2017.

SPIRITUAL SERVICE CARE FOR DEATH

It can be extremely difficult to “turn the corner” to really understand and accept the fact that one is dying. One might remain in denial about how serious the situation is. Or one may hold onto hope at all costs. Or someone might be seriously sick but there remains real medical hope for recovery even right up to the time of death. The advantage of fully accepting one’s approaching death is that it gives the person the opportunity to live accordingly. When appropriate, it can be the role of the Buddhist chaplain or teacher to help dying people to wisely “turn the corner.” When a Buddhist practitioner knows he or she is going to die, their practice becomes extremely important. In fact, when death is inevitable, one would hopefully put aside as much time as possible for practice. Some people find it important to have lots of support for practice. They might invite friends or *sangha*¹⁴ members to their home or hospital room to meditate with them. They might arrange for regular interviews with a Buddhist teacher to discuss their practice and concerns.

Some people prefer having lots of solitude and silence as they die. Others prefer the company of loved ones or fellow *sangha* members. If one does not have the ability to maintain one’s own practice, an option is to ask friends or teachers to lead you in guided meditation or to read passages of spiritual wisdom or spiritual instruction. The nature of one’s spiritual practice will change depending on where one is in the dying process. At times practice may be quite active and directed, for example in healing interpersonal issues, cultivating loving-kindness and forgiveness, and developing one’s concentration and calm. When one experiences fear, anger, or other painful emotions, these too should be seen as important parts of the overall dying process to be included in one’s mindfulness practice. The goal in dying is to try to die with as much awareness as possible and in a wholesome state of mind. Mindfulness itself is a wholesome activity of mind and so some people simply focus on continuing with the mindfulness practice as long as they can¹⁵. One of the reasons for healing interpersonal relationships is to militate against being plagued by unwholesome feelings while one is dying.

¹⁴A multitude: an assemblage: the Buddhist clergy. (1858, from Hindi sangha, Sanskrit samgha, from sam “together” + han “to come in contact.”) .

¹⁵Bhikkhu Nanamoli, **Mindfulness of Breathing: Buddhist Texts from the Pali Canon and extracts from the Pali Commentaries**,(Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society,2010), p.45.

A number of practices are recommended for improving the quality of one's mind. One can think about the Buddha or other inspiring spiritual teachers. One can practice loving-kindness to gladden the mind. One can perform acts of generosity. One can arrange for one's environment to be as peaceful and spiritually supportive as possible. Some people set up an altar or have pictures of loved ones or important spiritual teachers placed around the room.

Care for the Dying

It is easy for caregivers to focus exclusively on the needs of the person dying. However, in order to offer the best spiritual care, it is important that the caregivers be self-aware enough to be able to monitor the state of their own mind. If we want to help a person die with as much peace, acceptance and love as possible, the caregiver needs to be aiming toward having these qualities established in him or herself. This does not mean that these qualities need to be present; it means that we take responsibility for how we are feeling. Caregivers themselves may need support and it is important to search it out. Caring for the dying can be a spiritual practice in its own right that can support the spiritual practice of the dying.

The chaplain also needs to be sensitive to the family, friends, and caregivers around the dying. When family and friends can't let go of their clinging to the dying person, it can be harder for the person to die. Sometimes it can be wise for the chaplain to help family and friends to resolve their clinging. If this involves resentment or a grudge toward the dying person¹⁶, the chaplain may encourage a process of forgiveness. Close to the time of death it may be helpful for family and friends to indicate that as much as they love the person it is okay for the person to die and that they will be okay after the person has died. If appropriate, the chaplain should try to help the family and friends to grant the dying person permission to die.

The time shortly before death is extremely important and requires attending chaplains to use their best judgment and intuition as to what is needed. If the dying person can speak it is of course easiest to know their wishes. If they can't speak but has given

16 To stop living; become dead; expire: plants that died in the first frost of the season.

instructions before-hand for what to do, then it also might be relatively easy to know what to do. If the person is not speaking and has left no instruction then one must intuit what is needed. Whatever one does it is best to softly tell the person before doing so. Even if a person is unconscious or in a coma¹⁷, it is best to assume that they can hear you and to tell them what you think they need to hear. A chaplain should try to find out in advance the answers to the following questions. Where does the person want to die? Who does the person want to be present at the time of death? Who does the person want notified as their death approaches? What does the person want while dying or when dead?

This can include instruction concerning what to do with one's body, and desires for what kind of memorial service. Because Buddhism puts so much focus on dying peacefully it is important that the environment around the dying person be peaceful. Often this can best be accomplished at home and is one of the reasons to die at home. Perhaps an altar can be set up, flowers displayed and pictures put on the wall. While dying is a process of letting go, Buddhism does not assume that all of a person's attachments vanish as one dies. In order to assist in more thoroughly letting go, caregivers can quietly encourage a person to let go.

A passage from the Tibetan Book of the Dead¹⁸ has been adapted by some Western Theravada teachers as a reading used during We cannot always know when the final moment of death has occurred. Sometimes it is assumed that death occurs when the breath stops. However, there is a belief in Theravada Buddhism that death is final when the breath stops and the body have become cold. This means that the process of letting go may continue for a while after the breath stops. Sometimes people sense the consciousness leaving the body and this is recognized as the moment of death. Sometimes there can be a sense that the person's consciousness hovers for awhile in the room. Generally the final moments are the peacefulness of it can be quite palpable.

During this peaceful period immediately after the last breath, it is best to assume that the person can still hear what is being said. If it seems appropriate one can softly speak to the person. One might continue giving the person instructions in letting go, read sacred

17 A state of deep, often prolonged unconsciousness, usually the result of injury, disease, or poison, in which an individual is incapable of sensing or responding to external stimuli and internal needs.

18 Kevin Williams: **The Tibetan Book of the Dead and NDEs**, (Near-Death Experiences and the Afterlife, 2014).

texts, practice loving-kindness toward the person, chant the refuge chant, or meditate in the stillness. During this intermediate period after the breath has stopped it is recommended that the body not be touched in case such contact may disturb or confuse the letting go process of dying. While someone's death may trigger great grief, it is recommended that the room where someone has died remain as quiet and peaceful as possible. If possible, loud expressions of grief should be reserved for later or be done elsewhere. The reason for this is so that the expressions of grief not confuse or effect the person who is dying has died.

KEEPING THE BODY AFTER DEATH

After a person has died the body should be treated with respect, honoring the memory of the person. In the case of a sudden unexpected death, the body will probably have to go to the coroner for an autopsy¹⁹. There are no Theravada religious teachings that object to an autopsy. In the Theravada tradition once a person has died there is no particular practice or teaching about leaving the body undisturbed for any period of time.

Cremation²⁰ happens as quickly as possible and sometimes the body is kept at home for several days. Sometimes there can be an actual or ritual washing of the body. If this is desired, there is the option of inviting in *sangha* members to sit and chant with the body. While Theravada Buddhism does not share in this view of an extended intermediate period, there is sometimes a belief that the deceased person in his or her next rebirth can still benefit from things done for them. This means that while the beliefs are different, the practice of helping the departed is shared by both traditions.

Theravada practices done for the departed are usually acts of merit. This can include doing a refuge ceremony, chanting Buddhist teachings, practicing acts of generosity in the name of the deceased or dedicating merit to the departed. It is believed that these meritorious acts can benefit the departed if he or she is aware of the acts and rejoices in them. If a chaplain arrives after a person has died, they should discern what role is expected. Often the family and friends will look to the chaplain for guidance for what to do, especially in terms of spiritual and ritual matters. Generally it is good idea for the chaplain to immediately sit down next to the body of the departed and meditate with eyes

¹⁹Examination of a cadaver to determine or confirm the cause of death. Also called *necropsy*, *postmortem*, *postmortem examination*.

²⁰To burn dead (human) bodies. He asked to be cremated, not buried.

open, taking in whatever presence of the person that might still remain in the room. Even if no presence can be “felt”, practicing mindfulness while being open or “receptive” to the possibility can be helpful. Alternatively, the chaplain can focus mindfulness on whatever stillness or peace that can be sensed in the room.

CONCLUSION

Chaplaincy is our Buddhist path. Serving as a chaplain every day helps us to develop wisdom of non-attachment and loving-kindness and compassion to self and others. Daily meditation of mindfulness supports us to prepare ourselves as a chaplain. We are appreciative for the encounter to this vocation. The religious professional must undergo an inner transformation in becoming a chaplain so as to be able to action deeply and be totally present for a patient. Buddhist based mindfulness meditation practice offers a decisive method for this inner transformation through developing embodied presence in the practitioner. The chaplain’s role extends beyond caring for the patient and their family to the surrounding medical professionals, who also struggle emotionally, mentally, and spiritually in their work. Engaged Buddhism provides a means for Buddhists to extend outward their meditation practice and develop their understanding of ethics, structural issues, and social justice to meet the holistic demands of death and the wider suffering in human society.

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