

Competency Guidelines: Sheltering & Mass Care for Buddhists

These guidelines are provided to inform cultural competency and reasonable religious accommodation mandates for U.S. Mass Care providers, and to assist staff and volunteers in competently meeting the needs of Buddhists during disaster response or recovery operations—whether at a government or private shelter, or a shelter in a Buddhist temple or any other house of worship.



In Mass Care registration or service settings, a Buddhist person may or may not choose to self-identify and, despite common assumptions, their outward dress or appearance may not identify them as Buddhist. Typically, Buddhists conform to the clothing styles of country where they live. However, recent immigrants as well as Buddhist monks and nuns may wear ethnic clothing or robes, respectively. Therefore, given the geographic origins of Buddhism many adherents are Asian or South Asian. However, Asian or South Asian garb does not necessarily indicate religious observance. For example, Christians, Shinto, Taoists and members of other faith communities from Asia and South Asia may also wear the same/similar ethnic clothing. Although some Buddhist may feel comfortable raising concerns about their religious needs, others may not voice their concerns regarding any or all of the following issues.

SHELTERING

- **Greetings and Physical Interaction:** Upon entering a Mass Care setting, families and individuals who self-identify as Buddhist, or Buddhist monastics (monks and nuns), will feel most welcome if staff demonstrate an understanding of and attempt to accommodate their cultural and religious needs. Though Buddhist monastics will not necessarily expect staff to be knowledgeable of their customs, a recognition of and an attempt to observe certain practices will be appreciated by them as well as lay Buddhists. A greeting common to all Buddhist traditions is to put the palms together in *anjali* (the gesture of prayer) and bow the head. Most Buddhists do welcome handshakes with an embrace, but preferably between same sexes. Staff and other guests should understand that this is more customary than religious.
Special Note: Buddhist monks and nuns should typically not be touched by laypersons. Especially in the Theravada tradition of the Southeast Asian countries of Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, they should also never touch others. In all Buddhist traditions, an acceptable form of address when speaking to a monk or nun is "Venerable."
- **Shelter Setting:** For lay Buddhists, there are no specific religious restrictions regarding sleeping or arrangements. However, for monastics, monks should have sleeping quarters separately from nuns and other women. Nuns should be sheltered separately from monks and men. In addition, a monk should never be alone with a woman (lay or monastic) and a nun should never be alone with a man (lay or monastic). Generally speaking, a gender segregated sleeping space, divided into same-gender areas by a curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferable), is required.

PRAYER

- **Prayer Rituals:** Shelter operators and residents should be made aware that observant Buddhists are encouraged to pray or meditate daily—upon rising and before going to bed.
- **Preparing a Buddhist Prayer Space:** Particularly at a time of disaster or crisis, prayer is important to all people of faith. Although Buddhist contemplative practice, chanting, and other forms of prayer and veneration can be offered at any place and time, a designated space (shrine) is preferable. A Buddhist shrine will typically include an image of the Shakyamuni Buddha (the image of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama). Shrines may also include flowers, candles, incense, and bowls for offering water, food, or other items that may be distributed and consumed later. Images or icons of other important Buddhist figures may be included/substituted depending on the specific tradition or traditions of the local Buddhist community. Images and items may be displayed for rituals and respectfully stored for later use.

Generally speaking, Buddhist practitioners will be comfortable sharing such a space with religious others without requiring much in the way of specific items. Buddhists are usually comfortable meditating in chairs, though meditation cushions (or blankets) are best. (In sitting meditation, if the knees are above the waist, sitting for extended periods becomes uncomfortable.) Cushions or blankets would also be helpful for kneeling while chanting. In addition, a clear space for full-body prostrations might be appreciated.

In keeping with disaster chaplaincy best practices, a Mass Care chapel or prayer room should be established as a multi-faith space, without images or statues of any specific faith tradition. The area should be a quiet designated space with removable chairs, a plain table, and perhaps candles.

FEEDING

- **Vegetarian Food or Not:** Despite assumptions, there are no set dietary laws in Buddhism. Buddhist dietary restrictions are structured very differently than those of the Abrahamic (Christian, Jewish and Muslim) religions. There is no such clear distinction between permitted and forbidden foods in Buddhism. Therefore, there is a great deal of diversity in traditional Buddhist practice. It is always best for Mass Care providers to ask a local Buddhist community about their dietary needs, rather than to assume they are vegetarians or that they will eat meat. However, traditionally, many Buddhists are vegetarians.

Vegetarian diet is often interpreted as “do not harm,” and many Buddhists choose to be vegetarian as a result of this precept. However, a basic tenet of Buddhism is that of reincarnation and the belief that animals can be reincarnated as humans and vice versa. As a result, most Buddhists do not kill animals, and many do not eat meat or fish because this is considered to be bad for their karma. Buddhism gives utmost importance to *ahimsa* (non-violence), so there is a relationship between this concept and vegetarian practice in Buddhism.

- **Alms and Offerings:** Buddhist monastics thrive on donations and offerings from their local communities. For Theravada monastics, going on “alms-rounds” to receive the generous offerings (*dāna*) of the local community, even in a Mass Care setting this is an important practical and symbolic gesture. When offering food to monastics it is customary to present it with your hands on the table, saying something like, “Please accept this offering of food.” Vietnamese, Chinese, and Taiwanese monks and nuns are strict vegetarians, though others may not be. Practically speaking, Mass Care staff may find it helpful to leave food for monastics with lay Buddhists to disperse. This is a meritorious action for practicing Buddhists.

HOLIDAYS

- There are many Buddhist holy days held throughout the year. Many celebrate the birthdays of *Bodhisattvas* (deities) or other significant dates in the Buddhist calendar. The most significant celebration happens every May on the night of the full moon: Buddha Day, a celebration of the birth, enlightenment and death of the historical Buddha over 2,500 years ago.

MEDICAL, EMOTIONAL OR SPIRITUAL CARE

- When possible, some Buddhists may be more comfortable seeking and/or receiving assistance from same-gender service providers. Some may have difficulties in communicating openly or forthrightly with those of the opposite gender.
- **Special Note:** Given the restrictions regarding monastics’ being alone with persons of the opposite gender, Buddhist monks and nuns will only seek and/or receiving assistance from same-gender service providers. In addition, their medical treatment rooms and bed wards should be gender segregated by curtain or partition (acceptable), or separate rooms (preferable).

BUDDHIST DRESS

- Buddhist dress is usually a combination of culture and ethnicity, not religious requirement. Lay Buddhists usually do not wear distinctive clothing or haircuts, but sometimes may have stoles, pins, or vestments to denote lay leadership responsibilities within their respective communities. Typically, Buddhists conform to the clothing styles of the country where they live. However, recent immigrants, as well as Buddhist monks and nuns, may wear ethnic clothes or robes, respectively. Buddhist dress does not indicate a person’s level of education or reflect on a particular conservative (or liberal) religious or political orientation.
- Buddhist monks and nuns usually wear distinctive robes or clothing, which will look different depending on region and tradition. In addition, in certain traditions, their heads are shaved.

BUDDHISM

Buddhism is one of the five major world religions, with at least 500 million adherents worldwide. There are 3–4 million Buddhists in the United States (two-thirds of whom are Asian American). Adherents follow the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, the historical Buddha (“Awakened One”) who lived in India around the fifth century BCE. He taught four “noble truths”: (1) the truth that life is suffering/anxiety/dissatisfaction/stress; (2) the truth of its cause; (3) the truth of its cessation; and (4) the truth of the path toward its cessation. Typically, three schools of Buddhism are spoken of: the Theravada of South and Southeast Asia, the Mahayana of East Asia, and the Vajrayana of Central Asia—each having many traditions, variations, and communities). In the Theravada tradition, the Pali texts are canonical; in the Mahayana, the Sanskrit Buddhist *sutras* and commentarial literature and Chinese *Āgamas*; and in Vajrayana Buddhism, the *Kanjur* and *Tanjur*, as well as vast commentarial literature in the Tibetan language. The religion is called Buddhism in English, and adherents are Buddhists.



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