

Buddhist Profile

PLEASE NOTE: This religious profile provides an overview of the range of beliefs and practices that may apply to individuals who practice this religion. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. However this profile can be used as a guide to some of the issues that may concern your clients.

Introduction:

- Buddhism is first and foremost a philosophy of life. It was founded in the north-eastern region of India in what is now Nepal on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the *Buddha*, or the „Enlightened One’. Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world, being exceeded in numbers only by Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. In Australia it is the third largest religion after Christianity and Islam.
- There are two main traditions of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. Vajrayana, while a branch of the Mahayana tradition, is significantly unique in its cosmology and interpretation of the original teachings that for functional purposes it might be considered a third tradition. Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana are represented in Australia. Each tradition has many sects.
- *Theravada Buddhists* are primarily from Sri Lanka, Burma, India, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and to a lesser extent, Vietnam.
- *Mahayana* Buddhists are largely found in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.
- *Mahayana Vajrayana Buddhists* are largely from Tibet and Mongolia.
- These days we often hear people speak of *Modern Buddhism* or *Western Buddhism*, terms generally referring to a western phenomenon which began to emerge in the late 19th Century as a movement to produce a single form of Buddhism.

Migration:

- Buddhist settlement in Australia goes as far back as the 1848 gold rushes in Victoria and New South Wales with the arrival of Buddhist Chinese miners.
- The first permanent Buddhist community was established in the 1870s by Sinhalese migrants from Sri Lanka who were working on the sugar plantations in Queensland and in Thursday Island’s pearling industry.
- In the 1970s there was an increase in migration from Asian countries, a significant number of Buddhists came after the Vietnam War from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.
- Most Australian Buddhists are immigrants from Asian countries but there is a significant growing following amongst other Australians.

Local Demographics: Number of Buddhists residents in the Eastern Region

Local Government Area	Total Number of Buddhists	% of total Population in the Eastern Region of Melbourne
City of Boroondara	5,383	3.2%
City of Knox	5,864	3.8%
City of Manningham	4,670	4.0%
City of Maroondah	2,130	1.9%
City of Monash	12,390	6.7%
City of Whitehorse	8,040	4.9%
Shire of Yarra Ranges	1,489	0.9%
Eastern Region	39,966	3.8%

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a)

Language:

- Buddhists come from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, speaking the language of their country of origin.
- The Buddhist scriptures were originally recorded in Sanskrit, an ancient language of India, and *Pali* which is, even today, the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism. The Mahayana Tripitaka is written in Sanskrit but was translated from early times into Chinese and other ethnic languages.

Religious Practices:

Beliefs:

- Buddha was not a God; he was the son of a ruler of a small Kingdom and was born in 563BC near the Indian-Nepal border. At the age of 29 after visiting a nearby village where he encountered poverty and sickness for the first time, he left his family and wealth to seek answers to human suffering. After six years he finally realised 'truth', achieved enlightenment and became Buddha.
- The word Buddha comes from the root word 'budh' meaning 'to know or to awaken'.
- One fundamental belief involves rebirth: the concept that one must go through many cycles (the cycle's samsara) of birth, living, and death. After many such cycles, and or when a person releases their attachment to worldly existence, they can attain enlightenment, often referred to as Nirvana (*Pali. nibbana*) – a state of liberation and freedom from suffering.
- Karma is the law that every cause has an effect, i.e., our actions have results. Karma underlines the importance of all individuals being responsible for their past and present actions.

- The Buddha's Four Noble Truths, called the Dharma or 'Truth', are the core of Buddhist teachings and explore human suffering:
 - Suffering is an integral part of life and includes birth, ageing, sickness and death (Dukkha).
 - The cause is the ignorance surrounding selfish desire (Tanha).
 - The way to end suffering is to overcome desire and to experience enlightenment (Nirvana).
 - To overcome desire one must follow the principles of the Middle Way or Eightfold Path.
- The principles of the Eightfold Path, also known as the Middle Way, are: to lead a moral life, to be mindful and aware of one's thoughts, speech and actions, and to develop wisdom and understanding and compassion for others.
- The *Five Buddhist Precepts* are the moral code of Buddhism. The five precepts are not to take the life of anything living, not to take anything not freely given, to abstain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from harsh speech or telling lies and to avoid mind-altering intoxicants.

Worship:

- Buddhists do not pray to or worship Buddha.
- Meditation is one practice of many practices that Buddhists use to free the mind of ignorance and attachment.
- Buddhist religious practice styles vary according to the cultural origins and may include chanting of mantras, prostration and meditation. Buddhist practitioners often rise early in the morning to begin their devotions in the belief that this time of day is highly conducive to practice. Mid morning is also a significant time of ritual in Buddhist temples as this is the main ceremony of the day, when the daily food offering is made to the Buddha, and is followed by the midday meal. Early evening is the time of the third main practice period when devotees gather again to chant and pray and practice meditation together.
- Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha (faith in the Buddha's enlightenment), the Dharma (teachings of Buddha), and the Sangha (the religious community). Buddhists prostrate three times - to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha - when they enter the practice halls, as an expression of reverence, gratitude and humility.

Places of Worship:

- The Buddhist sacred place of practice is called a temple or shrine. It is not considered a place of worship per se since Buddha is not a God.
- Temples or meeting houses are a focal point for community life. Temples contain a shrine where meditation and religious ceremonies take place.

Religious / Community Leaders:

- The main task of the Buddhist monastic community is to be exemplars of the Vinaya, preserving and practicing the teachings of the Buddha and offering these teachings to the lay community.
- Fully ordained monks, nuns and significant lay spiritual leaders are highly regarded by their communities and are called upon to teach the Dharma as well as to conduct funeral rites and memorial ceremonies, and to offer spiritual support to the sick and bereaved.

Icons / Statues / Symbols:

- Buddhists make offerings on the shrines in the practice halls. The main offerings are of light (candles), water and incense, while fruit and flowers may also be offered. The lotus flower has a particular significance in Buddhism as it represents the purified mind which rises out of the mud of ignorance. All of the above objects may be seen on a Buddhist shrine.
- These offerings are symbols of Buddha's teachings.
- You will find many different images of Buddhas displayed in shrines and these various images represent different Buddha aspects and qualities such as, perfect wisdom and perfect compassion of the Buddha. The images serve to inspire Buddhists to develop these qualities in themselves.
- The shrine, including its statues or deities, should be treated with respect and reverence.
- Buddhist statues should be lifted or held by the base and never by the head or top of the object. In fact the head is a 'no-go' zone for Buddhists generally.

Scriptures:

- The Sanskrit Tripitaka "Three Baskets" Canon (*Pali: Tipitaka*) is the main authority for all Buddhists whether of the Theravada or Mahayana following. It contains many different texts collected into three main subject areas: (1) the *Vinaya*, which contains the precepts or rules governing the monastic community; (2) the *Sutras*, a collection of scriptures recording the teachings of the Buddha; and (3) the *Abhidharma*, a collection of Buddhist philosophical writings.
- The texts were established at group councils of the Sangha (communities of Buddhist monks and nuns) after the death of Buddha. The Buddha's teaching was a verbal tradition, preserved and passed on for about 400 years until later recorded in Sanskrit and Pali script.
- There are many other sacred texts which are expansions or commentaries on the core teachings, as well as prayers and meditation practices.
- Sacred texts are often translated into the language of the culture of origin.
- Sacred texts should be treated respectfully and never be placed directly on the floor.

Clothing:

- Only ordained monks and nuns wear robes, although some qualified lay spiritual teachers may wear a variation of the robes or some other indication of their teaching status.
- Lay Buddhists may wear medallions, prayer beads and/or coloured string around their wrists or necks.

Food:

- Some Buddhists are strict vegetarians.
- The consumption of meat is left to the discretion of the individual.
- Some Buddhists believe eating garlic, onions, scallions, leeks, and chives is a sin and believe that eaten raw they cause irritability of temper and if cooked act as an aphrodisiac.
- On holy days lay people may attend the temple and observe 8 precepts for the day, not eating after midday in the manner of Theravada monks, however consideration is allowed for the frail and the elderly for whom fasting could create medical problems.

Holy Days:

- All full moon and new moons are significant days for Buddhists and special ceremonies are held in the temples on these days. Full moon and new moon days are also especially significant for the ordained Sangha who gather together on these days to recite the Vinaya texts.
- See **Key Buddhist Festivals on p.6**

Customs / Values:

- Compassion for others, maintaining a calm and peaceful atmosphere, self-awareness and self-control are all Buddhist values.
- In general, shoes and head coverings should be removed prior to entering a shrine room or rooms used by a family. The family rooms are considered to be less sacred than the shrine room. Shoes are considered to bring negativity, dirt and uncleanness into the rooms from the outside world.
- Quiet or refrained speech should be observed in a temple/shrine room.

Courtship, Marriage and Child-rearing:

- Buddhism is a very liberal religion when it comes to marriage, there is no religious duty to marry or produce children but is seen as a personal preference.
- The Buddha discouraged old men to marry much younger women as they were less likely to be compatible.
- However Buddhism encourages followers to refrain from committing adultery or sexual misconduct.
- Separation and divorce is allowed.
- Birth control is allowed however abortion is prohibited.
- Buddhism values gender equality and parenting is a shared role.

Health Beliefs and Practices:

- The Buddhist understanding of good health has an emphasis on the balanced interaction between mind and body, as well as between life and its environment. When this delicate equilibrium is upset, illness tends to arise. Buddhist theory and practice are aimed to restore and strengthen this balance.
- In treatment of illnesses, Buddhism in no way rejects modern medicine and the powerful array of diagnostic and therapeutic tools available. Rather, it states that these can be put to most effective use in combating illness, when based on, and reinforced by a deeper understanding of the inner subjective process of life.
- Central to the Buddhist approach to health and healing is its emphasis on spiritual strength and an overriding sense of purpose in life, based on compassionate actions for others.
- Illness is believed to be an unavoidable consequence of actions in this or a previous life; in other words, it may be the result of karma. It is not the result of intervention by a divine being.
- A quiet and peaceful atmosphere is most beneficial when one is sick or dying. This allows for the sick person to rest better, as well as to practice meditation and prayer.
- Prayer is a tool for cleansing. Chanting creates peace of mind and an atmosphere of positive energy and tranquillity. Since prayer is part of the healing and cleansing process, prayer and

meditation are important to enable medications and other medical treatment to assist the healing.

Belief about Ageing:

- Ageing is viewed as part of the cycle of suffering, nevertheless with age comes experience and wisdom. The aged are respected and in some cases venerated for their accumulated wisdom.

Belief about Disability and Mental Illness:

- Disability is part of the suffering that is inherent to life.
- Some Buddhists believe that aspects of disability and mental illness are a result of past and current life actions; the result is one's Karma.

Belief about Death:

- Dying is seen as a transition process to the next life. It is of great importance to provide a suitable atmosphere that allows a person to die in peace, that appropriate prayers are said, and to seek and provide qualified religious help from Buddhist Monks or Nuns.
- The handling of the body of a deceased is also extremely significant in some Buddhist traditions. The Mahayana tradition requires a period, varying from eight hours to three days, in which the body of a deceased person should not be handled.

Communication Styles:

- The more common greeting gesture for Buddhists is to place both hands in a prayer position; palms together at chest height, then bow gently. However, some sects have their hands folded over their heart in greeting.
- Theravada monks and nuns should not be touched physically by someone of the opposite gender. Mahayana monks and nuns are also conservative in physical contact but the restrictions are not as strongly prescribed as they are for ordained Theravadins. Handshaking with lay people is generally permitted apart from the exceptions previously mentioned.

Naming Conventions:

- This is more dependent on the cultural background of the individual.
- However, monks and nuns take on spiritual names given to them at the time of their formal commitment to Buddhism.

The Role of the Family / Women:

- Men and women have equal status in Buddhist faith but this is often over-ridden by cultural norms.

Key Buddhist Festivals / Significant Dates:

- There are many special or holy days celebrated throughout the year by the Buddhist community.

- Some holy days are specific to particular Buddhist traditions or ethnic groups. There are two aspects to take into consideration regarding Buddhist festivals: most Buddhists (with the exception of the Japanese) use the Lunar Calendar, and that the dates of Buddhist festivals vary between Buddhist traditions.
- Vesak or 'Buddha day' is the most significant celebration which takes place every May on the night of the full moon. Buddhists all over the world celebrate the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha.

Local services useful for Buddhist residents in the Eastern Region

Support Services

Buddhist Council of Victoria (BCV)

Address: 36 McDowall Street, Mitcham, 3132

Ph: 0422 961 162

Website: www.bcv.org.au

The Buddhist Council of Victoria is a representative body that acts on behalf of Buddhists in the Australian state of Victoria. It is actively engaged in representing the needs of Buddhists to all levels of government, provides speakers for interfaith dialogue and works widely with the community.

Buddhist Temples and Centres

If you are looking for a Buddhist temple or centre in your locality, a full list of Buddhist temples and centres can be located on the BCV website at www.bcv.org.au

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