

# JCECC Conference

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*Session 2: Spiritual care at the End of  
Life from a Variety of Perspectives*

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**“Buddhist Principles and Practices  
Applicable to Palliative Care  
Settings”**

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# The Quest: To find what causes suffering?

- Buddhism and Buddhist practice have been inextricably linked to suffering, dying, and death since the Buddha delivered his first sermon on the:
- Four Noble Truths and
- the “dependently arisen” nature of existence; causes and conditions.

# Who was the Buddha? Siddhartha Gautama

- Born in India/Nepal about 500 years before Jesus of Nazareth (Christianity)
- Son of wealthy aristocratic family
- Snuck out of family compound and saw four sights that were deeply disturbing to him.

## The four sights:

- a decrepit old man,
- a severely diseased man,
- a corpse, and
- a religious hermit practicing meditation.

# Big Buddha Statue – Lantau Island Hong Kong – Po Lin Monastery



# Buddhist-inspired practice for working with the dying addresses:

- the nature and causes of suffering,
- wisdom,
- compassion,
- interdependence, and
- impermanence.

# Religion and Death

- F. Forrester Church (1989) states “Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die” (Buehrens & Church, p. 5).

## multi-layered with societal religious worldviews

- The religious views or worldview of the unit of care may also be multi-layered with influence of both societal religious worldviews (deep culture) as well as a particular religious practice which they may follow.
- In Hong Kong, holidays of both Buddhism and Christianity are observed.



# multi-layered with societal religious worldviews

- The patient may or may not be Buddhist
- Family members may or may not be Buddhist.
- Helpers may or may not be Buddhist.

# Not just for Buddhist helpers

- This presentation is not about providing care for only Buddhist patients and family members.
- Also useful in successfully providing care to those at the end of life and their loved-ones regardless of the religious views of the caregiver or the patient.

# Not for Buddhists Only

- Many modern theories and models of caregiving, include “mindfulness.”
- Acknowledgement of the reality of suffering in human existence.
- Acceptance that the package of human existence includes the reality of illness, suffering, and death.
- Appreciation of this wonderful gift of life that we have been given.

# Parables and Similes

- Examples include the Parable of Kisa Gotami,
- the imagery of the Lotus flower, and
- the story of the Two Arrows.

# Kisagotami

- Kisagotami came from a poor family. Her young son died suddenly. In great sorrow, she could not accept the truth of his passing. She carried his body from house to house, begging for a cure for him. Some people laughed at her or turned their backs on her. Finally, a kind man suggested she go see the Buddha. Clutching the body of her dead son to her hip, she approached the Buddha for help. “Please give me medicine for my son.” The Buddha saw deeply into her tragic misunderstanding, and told her to return to her village and collect tiny grains of mustard seed from those families who had not been touched by death. Going from house to house, she saw that every household in the village had been touched by death. Through this experience she realized the truth of impermanence and the inevitability of death. She then began the process of mourning her son’s death. Joan Halifax “Being with Dying”

# The Imagery of the Lotus flower

- Such a beautiful and useful plant, only grows in swampy, muddy, still water; water that may smell terribly, yet, out of this water that is unfit to drink or swim in, grows a beautiful plant and flower.
- The muddy water is an image of suffering out of which something beautiful can grow.  
<https://www.lionsroar.com/what-is-the-lotus/>

# The Parable of the Arrow

- A person is struck by an arrow which causes physical pain.
- As the person engages in self-pity or lamenting how awful it is that he has been struck by the arrow, it is as if he has been struck by a second arrow, as he causes him/herself suffering about the first arrow.

[https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/SN/SN36\\_6.html](https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/SN/SN36_6.html)

# Pain and Suffering

- “Pain is a natural part of the experience of life. Suffering is one of many possible responses to pain....it is not always the pain per se but the way we see it and react to it that determines the degree of suffering we will experience”

- ~Jon Kabat-Zinn.



# Practices

- Various types of meditation,
- controlling the breath, and
- mindfulness practice.
- Chanting the Buddha's name: "Namo Amitoufo"
- Chanting of Buddhist scriptures has also been shown to provide comfort for those who are grieving.

# The Way of **Wisdom** and **Compassion**

- **Wisdom:** “The attainment of wisdom involves...seeing things as they truly are” (Ruben Habito, 2005, p. 78).
- We need to actively seek wisdom throughout life and at the end-of-life.

# Compassion

- Compassion means to “suffer with (as opposed to mere sympathy or pity), and refers to a way of being, that sees oneself as vitally interconnected with every being in this universe.
- Suffering with, and being joyful with, flow naturally out of being awakened”  
(Habito, 1993, p. 31).

# 觀音 - Gun Yam - Guan Yin – Avalokiteshvara “She who hears the cries of the world.”

Repulse Bay –  
Hong Kong Island



Guiyuan Temple –  
Wuhan, China



# How does Buddhism define a **“good death?”**

- A **“good death”** is one in which the dying person dies in the right frame of mind.
- Dying should be with mindfulness and mental clarity (Damien Keown, 2005, p. 952).

# See the ordinariness of death.

- Death is inescapable; all living things will die.
- “Death is often seen as a mistake, a failure, or a breakdown” (Judith Lief, 2001, p. 165).
- Be attentive to these themes while listening to the patient and family.

# How can we help?

## **Attitudes and Perspectives**

- In our work with the dying “we need to accept people as they are rather than trying to change them” (Lief, 2001, p. 164).
- Caregivers sometimes add to the distress of the dying by placing more expectations on them on “how” they should die.
- We need to face our urge to fix everything.

# An important goal is to bring peace

*Better than  
if there were  
thousands of meaningless words  
Is one meaningful word  
that on hearing brings peace.*

- Dhammapada, 8, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

- In other words, it is possible to talk too much. There is no need to fill-up the silence.



# Pain & Suffering

- **Suffering** can come from a number of causes:
- To alleviate the person's suffering we need to understand its source (Lief, 2001) and we do that through listening to what they say and what they avoid talking about.

We can help others by helping ourselves through  
**“Cultivating personal death awareness”**

- “One of the ways we avoid pain in life is through distracting ourselves from immediate experience” (Lief, 2001, p. 10).
- Zen/chan meditation and other mindfulness practices focus on directly experiencing the present moment (Habito, 1993).

# Definition of Mindfulness

- a process of ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally’, which ‘nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance’ of how things are (Kabat-Zinn 1994).
- Bear in mind that, at least in many English-language settings, the words “be mindful” have lost their meaning, and may simply mean “pay attention.”

# the mindfulness of impermanence

- This same mindfulness enables the helper “to open their heart to the grief of others without going so far as to suffer together with them, simply by holding the sorrow in the open space of one’s mind without judgements or reactivity.”
- Analayo, Bhikkhu. 2016. *Mindfully Facing Disease and Death*.

# The Cycle of Life and Death

- By being mindful of impermanence, “We come to see that dying is in the life of everything. Our efforts to keep things from changing is the cause of no end of suffering” (Frank Ostaseski, 2000).

# ‘Letting Go’ means ‘Letting Be’

- “Letting Go” is a stance which we take that facilitates an attitude of openness to new experience.
- Avoid walking into a patient’s room with preconceived notions about what we will see, which interferes with our seeing what is actually there.
- We need to be aware of the attitudes and expectations which we bring, so that these do not interfere with our acceptance of the dying person for who they are (Lief 2001).

# **“Welcome everything and push away nothing.”**

- Open our hearts and minds to the dying person.
- Allow them to show us what is most important to them at this time of life without imposing judgments.
- We don't have to like what is arising.
- Our task is to listen to and pay attention to their ever changing needs (Ostaseski, 2000).

# **“Be Present”**

- “Be Present” reminds us of the “power of simple presence, silence, and stillness” (Lief, 2001, p. 116).



# In Conclusion



- Practice wisdom
- Practice Compassion
- Practice Mental Clarity
- Practice Mindfulness
- Be attentive
- Know that life is change

# Appendices

# The Four Noble Truths

- 1) Life is out of balance and characterized by a condition of dis-ease (suffering).
- 2) There is a cause for this condition, which is craving.
- 3) There is a way leading to the extinction of the condition of craving.
- 4) The eightfold path is the way to be freed from craving.

# The Eightfold Path to Awakening

- 1) Right view
- 2) Right intention
- 3) Right speech
- 4) Right action
- 5) Right livelihood
- 6) Right effort
- 7) Right mindfulness
- 8) Right concentration