

## PART V: CONSIDERING WORLD RELIGIONS IN END OF LIFE CARE

- The following section presents three case studies to illustrate end of life care considerations from the perspective of three world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism
- Our purpose here is to provide a framework for thinking about how religious traditions may influence the needs of a person at the end of life, and the needs of that person's family as they grieve and survive
- We encourage you to use these cases as a starting point for thinking and learning about the role of religious beliefs and traditions in end of life care
- How religious traditions develop and are embodied in the daily lives of peoples is richly complex
  - Religion interacts with other dimensions of culture such as economic systems and local customs
  - Religious traditions are dynamic, never static
    - They evolve over time to meet the needs of adherents
    - They adapt to the conditions of culture
  - Wide variations exist in beliefs and practices, even during the same time period or within a cultural subgroup
- Studying the scriptures, creation myths, dogma, laws, or symbol systems in isolation from the religion as it is practiced by particular members yields a limited, if not skewed, understanding
  - Making generalizations on the basis of a person's religious affiliation or membership is of limited usefulness
  - Knowledge of the basic beliefs and practices of the world's major religions will help providers of palliative care only as a point of entry
  - Therefore, consider the information that follows on the major world religions as only one tool among others needed to adequately and sensitively assess patient and family religious/spiritual framework and needs
  - As with our efforts to respect culture difference more generally, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing if it forecloses an active, sensitive inquiry into a person's own set of beliefs and practices

**HINDUISM BASIC FACTS:** There are an estimated 764 million followers of Hinduism around the world with more than 900,000 residing in the United States

### Traditional Beliefs: Brahman – The ultimate Reality

- Hinduism teaches there is one ultimate reality behind the universe, which is called **Brahman**
- This reality is manifested in the universe as various gods and goddesses, who are worshiped as forms of Brahman
- This same reality exists as the inner soul of human beings
- Through reincarnation, or successive life-embodiments of the soul, unity with God may eventually be realized

### Paths to Moksha, the Ultimate Liberation

- **Moksha**, liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is the ultimate goal of the Hindu
- Paths to liberation include:
  - Selfless action
  - Religious devotion

### Karma – The Basis of Hindu Ethics

- Hindu ethics is founded on a belief in **karma**
- Good actions lead to the accumulation of merit, insure a rebirth in a higher realm, and speed the soul toward unity with God
- Evil deeds have the opposite effect
- Right action is determined in part by one's birth or station in life (economic class, gender, or caste)
- Human life itself is divided into "life stages" with normative ways of living for each
- For example, the elderly should renounce their attachment to this life, rein in desire, eschew worldly pleasure, and relinquish concern over household matters

## Acts of Worship and Devotion

- Two main types of worship are practiced in Hinduism
  - In **Arati**, fire and other items are waved in front of an picture or image of the deity
  - In **Puja**, fruit, flowers, and other ingredients are offered to the deity in a more elaborate ritual. (National)
- Acts of devotion, observance of holidays, and enactment of sacred stories build a personal storehouse of merit and cancel sins
- Some sects believe that Vishnu or other gods can directly assist the devotee in attaining union with Brahman (Kramer)
- Through the practice of yoga, the study of sacred texts of the Upanishads, Vedas, and Baghavad Gita, and more esoteric spiritual disciplines the Hindu may also try to realize the soul's reabsorption into Brahman
- Both erotic and ascetic practices increase spiritual knowledge of and union with the divine

## Traditional Spiritual Practices of Hinduism Include:

- Right actions that correspond to social location, family obligations, life stages, gender roles
- Yoga, meditation, and study of scripture for self-awareness and overcoming attachment
- Intercessions to and worship of divinities
- Aravedic medicines for purification and healing
- Daily bathing in running water for physical and spiritual cleansing
- Dietary restrictions include not eating beef to strict vegetarianism; Special fast days observed for purification
- Modesty regarding bodily functions and sexuality
- Strict gender roles and castes (in some parts of the world)

## Hinduism - Actions Before and After Death

- Actions before death
  - The dying person actively prepares to "attain death"
  - Ideally chooses moment to take final breath
  - If possible, a relative puts water from the Ganges river in mouth of dying person to bring peace and comfort
  - Returning to the holy city of Banaras, India to die believed by many to insure a rebirth in Heaven or release from continued rebirth
  - Family chants, reads scripture, sings devotional prayers, and recites mantras to help the dying person focus on Brahman
- Actions after death
  - Family washes body after death, trims hair, dresses deceased in new clothes
  - Cremation preferred to burial so soul is freed for transmigration
    - In India the son ignites funeral pyre of parent, cracks open the skull of deceased to release breath, and collects remaining bones and ashes in three days for ritual disposal
  - The funeral is celebratory often employing the image of a marriage party as death is viewed as reunion with the Beloved

## Hinduism - Implications for Hospice/Palliative Care

- Hinduism has a spiritual framework that accepts terminal illness and death as part of a cosmic cycle or order of things
- The state of the mind of the dying person at the time of death influences their rebirth
  - Full cognizance is preferred and may lead the patient to refuse sedatives or pain medication that would cause loss of consciousness
- Physical pain or a prolonged dying process may be attributed to selfish or harmful actions carried out by the patient during their own lifetime
- Terminal illness with time for preparation is preferred to a sudden, unexpected death
- If the time of death or course of illness likely to be unpredictable medical staff should inform patient and family
- For the elderly, many medical interventions available for treating cancer and life-threatening illness may be viewed as "futile" because sickness, deterioration of body, aging process seen as natural
  - A an elderly terminally ill patient's detachment from treatment decisions or withdrawal into spiritual preparation should not be mistaken for depression or lack of concern for family
  - Contrarily, lack of acceptance of life-threatening disease by loved ones, family conflict, or unfinished business may cause dying person to become "attached" and increase spiritual distress

- Combine Western and Aravedic medicines
  - Chanting, singing, meditation, yoga, and other spiritual practices may also be utilized as alternative forms of pain and symptom control
- Patients may prefer aids, nurses, or physicians of own gender
- Provide means for ritual cleansing on daily basis in the hospital
- Ritual fasting may impact the ability to take certain medicines; if death anticipated the patient may abstain from nourishment as part of preparation and renunciation of body/material world
- Death of the young or of adult children before their parents is viewed as unnatural
  - It may cause increased distress for family and significantly alter the spiritual framework and practices outlined above

### **BUDDHISM BASIC FACTS:**

- Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who lived in India in the 6th century BCE
  - Legend has it that the sight of an ill person, an old man, and a dead body led this former Hindu prince on a spiritual search to explain the cause of suffering and find a means to its cessation
  - As Buddhism spread from India to China, Japan, Tibet, and other Asian countries wide variances in belief and rituals developed
- More than 250 million people worldwide are Buddhists

### **Buddhism - Traditional Beliefs**

#### **The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path**

- The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path proclaimed by the Buddha upon his enlightenment are the foundation for Buddhist belief and practice
- They put forth the impermanence and interdependence of all reality and an ethic that respects the dignity and worth of each living being
- Buddhists celebrate the birth, enlightenment, proclamation of the ***dhamma*** (teachings), and death of Gautama but most sects do not consider the Buddha to be a god

#### **Buddhist View of the Self**

- Buddhists believe that the self or soul is only a temporary composite of matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formation, and consciousness that dissolve at the time of death, although some stream of consciousness undergoes reincarnation
- Through spiritual practice a person is freed from the illusion of a permanent self, attachment to any mental or material state of being, and desire for pleasure

#### **Nirvana**

- The ultimate goal is enlightenment, or ***nirvana***, a state of consciousness that may be attained during life and primarily through one's own efforts, though it may take many lifetimes to reach
- Pure Land Buddhists, distinct from the Theravada tradition, believe that nirvana is an actual heaven or paradise entered into through faith in Amitabha Buddha or Guan-yin, the goddess of compassion

#### **Death in the Buddhist Tradition**

- Meditation upon decaying bodies has long been employed by Buddhist monks as a means to comprehend the
- Death is also a prominent theme in Buddhist scripture (The Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra) and popular tales

#### **Buddhism - Spiritual Practices**

- The primary goal is to help the practitioner achieve a clear, calm state of mind and penetrate the true nature of reality. These include:
  - Meditation
  - Breathing exercises

- Chanting
- Study of scripture
- Mindfulness
- Prostrations
- Concentration on mandalas or other sacred images
- Skillful, good, compassionate deeds are the result of a pure mind and produce merit in the next life; lying, stealing, killing, sexual impropriety, and other harmful or selfish actions increase suffering
- The Eightfold Path is the means to liberation from suffering and the foundation for an ethical life
  - Right views
  - Intent
  - Speech
  - Conduct
  - Livelihood
  - Effort
  - Mindfulness
  - Concentration
- Veneration of monks, reverence for ancestors, and devotional rites are also practiced to accumulate merit
- The belief in the interconnection of all living beings promotes vegetarian diets and non-violence

### **Buddhism - Actions Before and After Death**

- Actions before death
  - The state of a person's mind as death approaches/at the time of death is of critical importance
  - All efforts are made to relieve the dying person's agitation, anxiety, fear, and attachment
  - The family, relatives, friends, and monks will repeat mantras and chant certain **sutras** (teachings of the Buddha) believed to help calm the mind and strengthen knowledge of the true nature of reality
  - Those accompanying the dying person should refrain from any display of emotions or behavior that will disturb this state of mind
  - Mahayana Buddhists may focus their thoughts on the Pure Land or repeat the name of Amida Buddha to ensure their liberation
  - **The Tibetan Book of the Dead** proscribes elaborate rituals to guide the dying person and later the corpse through the transition from life to rebirth, a state known as **bardo**
- Actions after death
  - Many Buddhists believe that the life force or consciousness remains in and around the corpse for hours after the last breath is taken to as long as several days
  - No embalming is necessary; cremation or burial conducted by lay persons or monk
  - Funeral service may include:
    - The wearing of white by the family
    - Burning of incense
    - Picture of the deceased
    - Offering of fruit and flowers
    - Chanting and extolling the virtues of the deceased
  - Chanting and meditating for the deceased is continued after cremation, often for 49 days, to help the soul on its journey from one state to the next and to comfort the bereaved
  - The mental and emotional state of the bereaved influence the state of the soul of the deceased and its rebirth. Except where cultural norms dictate specific behaviors, often along gender lines, excessive expression of grief is avoided
  - Anniversary observed at 49 days and 100 days
  - Buddhist All Soul's Day observed in many temples in the month of August
    - Many families erect altars in the home with picture of the loved one
    - Conduct regular rituals on behalf of the deceased

### **Buddhism - Implications for Hospice/Palliative Care**

- The primary goal of hospice/palliative care to relieve suffering and facilitate a good death fits well with a Buddhist framework of meaning, unless medical staff focus solely on the relief of physical pain
  - The relief of spiritual suffering and concern for the mental state of the dying patient needs to be fully integrated into a plan of care
- Pain management may be impeded by the dying person's spiritual preference for full awareness

- Contrarily, controlling pain, anxiety, and terminal restlessness through medications may be the means to ensure a calm mental state at the time of death and reassure family of the future well-being of the deceased's spirit
- Telling the patient about their life-threatening illness allows for mental and spiritual preparation
- Spiritual practices may be more easily accommodated when palliative care is provided in the home
  - However, if the patient is in the hospital setting, every effort should be made to respect central spiritual practices of meditation, chanting, and the overriding need for a calm, undisturbed mental state for the dying person in their last few days and hours
  - Not touching the body for several hours after the last breath is taken is easily accommodated in the patient's home by instructing the family to wait to contact the hospice program
  - In the hospital, medical staff need to be educated that from the perspective of the Buddhist family, the person is not really dead until this time period has elapsed, even if vital signs indicate otherwise
  - The patient may correctly be regarded as alive, (a paying patient necessarily occupying a bed and room), when considered from within this framework of understanding

#### **JUDAISM BASIC FACTS:**

- Jewish views on and practices regarding death differ widely
  - In addition to three main strands of Judaism – Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed – regional differences contribute to varied beliefs and practices
  - Additionally, Judaism has always permitted a wide latitude for differences of opinion
  - Below are listed some “traditional” beliefs and practices
    - May or not may not be relevant to the patient/family in your care
    - Be sure to ask which, if any of these, are meaningful to them

#### **Actions Before Death**

- Traditional/Orthodox Jews may need assistance in observing dietary laws and the Sabbath during hospitalization
  - These laws may impact travel of visitors, use of elevators, signing of papers, funeral preparation, removal of the body, etc.
- Visiting the sick, giving, comfort and aid are important Jewish obligations
- Prayers for healing (Mi Sh-beirach) may be offered by the rabbi or by members of the congregation
  - Psalms are frequently used to provide comfort, strength, and hope to the dying person and to their family
- Though debate remains regarding prolonging or hastening death, making the dying person comfortable is an important value
  - Talmudic law encourages the removal of anything that may bind the dying person's soul to the body
  - For modern Jews, this may authorize a DNR and even removal of life support
- If the patient is a Holocaust survivor, this may directly impact medical care
  - Some areas of increased sensitivity as result of this experience
    - Bathing/showers
    - Medical testing
    - Nutrition status/weight loss
    - Perception of pain and suffering
    - Views of death itself
    - Importance of memory
    - Multiple loss and grief
- Beliefs regarding the afterlife vary widely among Jews
  - Death is viewed as a natural part of life but rarely do the dying person or family find it comforting to focus on the afterlife
  - Greater comfort is found in the belief that one has “left a good name” or will be remembered honorably
- Life review with the dying person is in keeping with a Jewish focus on the value of life on this earth, good deeds, and the legacy of the deceased
  - An “ethical will” may be prepared by the dying person to help identify the meaning of their life, lessons for survivors, and ways in which loved ones may continue to honor their memory through words and deeds
- The Viddui may be recited by the dying person as a prayer of confession and reassurance about future well-being of loved ones
  - The Shema, or affirmation of faith, is frequently recited as someone is dying/at the time of death
  - Words of forgiveness may also be offered to the dying person/deceased by family and friends
- Dying persons are to be attended to constantly

- At the time of death, no one should leave the room unless they are overcome physically or emotionally

### **Actions After Death**

- From the time of death until the funeral, the body should be attended
  - The family may fulfill this duty or assign a “shomer”
- Religious laws help preserve “Kavod Hamet,” respect for the dead
  - They dictate how the body should be handled after death
  - These rites may include:
    - Closing of eyes and mouth
    - Applying clay over the eyelids
    - Facing the body toward the door
    - Placing the body on the floor for 20 minutes
    - Placing the arms alongside the body rather than folded over the chest
    - Purification of the body
    - Wrapping the body in a white shroud and (for men) in a prayer shawl
    - Customarily, only members of the same sex are permitted to touch the corpse
    - These rituals may be facilitated by family members, the funeral home, and/or the Chevrah Kadish (burial society)
- Religious laws prohibit the mutilation of the body
  - Therefore, traditional Jews usually decline autopsy as well as organ donation unless they will directly “save a life”
  - Cremation and embalming are usually not performed, though less conservative Jews may opt for these rituals
  - Cremation can be a source of conflict and debate within a family, even for non-religious Jews
- The funeral and burial usually occur as soon as possible, within 24-72 hours
- Some rituals that may be included as part of a traditional Jewish funeral and burial include
  - Rending of clothes of immediate family in mourning (Keriyah)
  - Closed casket with a viewing of the deceased only by the immediate family before the funeral service
  - Prayers of forgiveness to help mourners
  - Eulogy celebrating the life of the deceased
  - Procession to the graveside
  - Family and friends placing shovels of dirt onto the casket
  - Recitation of the Kaddish (Mourner’s prayer)
  - Flowers are not customarily part of a Jewish funeral
  - Family often suggests charities to receive contributions in lieu of flowers
- A seven day period of intense mourning and visitation **follows** the burial (Shiva), though many modern Jews may shorten this period to 2-3 days
  - A wake or visitation **before** the funeral is not customary for Jewish persons
  - In some homes of the bereaved, mirrors are covered, the family sit on stools, and men do not shave during this period of grief
  - The prayer of Kaddish is said daily
- Sh-loshim is the thirty day period that marks the end of ritualized mourning for all deaths except that of a parent
  - Mourners refrain from entertainment and recite prescribed prayers during this time, though they may return to work
  - Rituals of mourning for the death of a parent last up to a full year
  - The “unveiling” of the tombstone customarily occurs shortly before the one year anniversary of death
  - Mourners may place small stones near the tombstone
- Deceased loved ones are remembered with the lighting of a Yahrzeit candle at the year anniversary of their death
  - During four Jewish Holidays (Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, Passover, and Shavu’ot) a memorial prayer (Yizkor) is recited as a regular part of these religious observances
  - Kaddish, the mourners’ prayer, does not mention death, loss, or grief. Rather it reaffirms faith in G-d during a time when a person’s faith may be shaken

### **Implications for Hospice/Palliative Care**

- Until recently, the primary emphasis in Judaism on the value of life has led to a resistance to palliative care and a preference for life-prolonging medical interventions

- Modern Jews and members of the more liberal strands of Judaism have shown greater openness to the goals of palliative care
- Once palliative care is accepted, there should be no **religious** obstacles to pain management
- Given the wide variance of belief and practice in Judaism, as early as possible the palliative care team should request information regarding religious beliefs, practices and prohibitions
  - Many Orthodox Jews are used to educating the secular world about specific ways to assist them in remaining observant or in adapting to the regulations of medical institutions
- Many persons who count themselves Jews are not religious either in belief or observance
  - However, Jewish culture, history, and ethnicity may be of great significance
  - Burial practices may reflect this connection to “tradition” even if the person is not religious
- The Holocaust may be a factor in medical care not only of someone who is a survivor of the concentration camps but for the children and relatives of survivors as well
  - Mourning may be complicated for family and friends of Holocaust survivors
- A history of persecution and attempts at conversion by Christians means some Jews will be suspicious of chaplains and spiritual care
  - Staff will need to dispel common misperceptions and myths and/or arrange for spiritual care by a rabbi

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