

# SPIRITUAL CARE FOR BUDDHIST COLLEGE STUDENTS

A GUIDE FOR CHAPLAINS

[Maitreya Association for Buddhist Campus Chaplains](#)





## 1. The Foundation: Contemplative Care

The foundation of Buddhist spiritual care is contemplative care—the art of providing spiritual, emotional, and pastoral support in a way that is informed by a personal, consistent contemplative or meditation practice. It is rooted in deep listening, compassionate presence, and the creation of a holding environment that supports transformation.

This approach recognizes that relationship itself is healing, and that the cultivation of wise attention and unconditional presence creates the conditions for genuine spiritual growth.

## 2. What is Buddhist Chaplaincy?

*As Buddhist chaplains we do not serve as intermediaries or authorities per se, but as capable, steady companions who have investigated suffering through our own life experiences. So from our spiritual practice, we learn to lend patients our spirit and stability of mind for the possibility for their own healing, awakening, and transformation.*

Spiritual support from a Buddhist perspective can be defined as:

- Willingness to bear witness
- Willingness to help others discover their own truth
- Willingness to sit and listen to stories that have meaning and value
- Helping another to face life directly
- Welcoming paradox and ambiguity into care—and trusting that these will emerge into some degree of awakening
- Creating opportunities for people to awaken to their True Nature

—Jennifer Block, in *Arts of Contemplative Care*



### 3. What Makes College Buddhist Chaplaincy Unique?

Buddhist college chaplaincy differs significantly from other forms of campus ministry in several key ways:

#### Diversity of Practice Traditions

College Buddhist communities often encompass practitioners from Theravada, Zen, Tibetan, Pure Land, and secular Buddhist backgrounds, requiring chaplains to navigate multiple lineages and cultural expressions of the Dharma. These traditions often do not share the same liturgy, praxis, or means of textual study.

#### Diversity of Cultures

Buddhist campus communities include both heritage Buddhists (students with a Buddhist cultural background) and Euro-Western Buddhists. Heritage Buddhists often have more focus on cultural celebrations such as Lunar New Year, Chuseok, and Vesak, while Euro-Western Buddhists often have more focus on secular meditation. However, these groups are not monoliths.

It is important for Buddhist campus ministry to meet the needs of both communities, so that each student may find moments of connection with what is familiar, while also drawing inspiration from what is new.

#### Academic Integration

Within a campus setting, chaplains provide leadership training and meaning-making related to students' studies and vocation. The college environment provides distinctive opportunities to integrate contemplative practice with intellectual development, offering students tools for both academic success and spiritual maturation.

#### Multifaith Context

Buddhist chaplains are usually serving in the context of a multifaith model, in which interfaith understanding is a high priority. However, given that many Buddhist students are approaching their own tradition at a beginning level, this can be challenging. In addition, many students look to Buddhist studies professors for illumination in matters of faith and practice. The Religious Studies model commonly uses a hermeneutics of suspicion, which may complicate their spiritual journey.



## 4. Supporting Holistic Development

The ultimate goal of Buddhist spiritual care in higher education is to support students in developing both conventional and ultimate wisdom—helping them navigate the practical challenges of college life while introducing them to transformative spiritual practices that can serve them throughout their lives.

### Understanding Student Development

Young adults in higher education are typically navigating several crucial developmental tasks:

- **Identity Formation:** Students are exploring who they are beyond their family and cultural origins, often experimenting with new beliefs, practices, and ways of being.
- **Intellectual Development:** The rigorous academic environment challenges students to individuate in ways that can create tension with regard to their familiar roots.
- **Social Integration:** Many students struggle with loneliness and the challenge of forming meaningful relationships in a new environment.
- **Future Orientation:** Anxiety about career choices, life direction, and purpose is pervasive among college students.



## 5. Challenges Facing Buddhist Students

Buddhist college students face several specific challenges:

**Cultural Displacement:** Heritage Buddhist students may feel disconnected from their cultural and religious roots while adapting to Western academic environments. They may struggle to find authentic expressions of their tradition that resonate with their peers.

**Spiritual Exploration vs. Academic Pressure:** Students interested in contemplative practice often find it challenging to balance meditation and spiritual study with demanding academic schedules and achievement-oriented campus cultures.

**Skepticism and Intellectualization:** Academically trained students may approach Buddhism primarily as an intellectual exercise, missing the experiential and transformative dimensions of practice.

**Isolation and Community Building:** The transient nature of college life makes it difficult to establish stable spiritual communities and consistent practice relationships.

**Mental Health Challenges:** Contemporary college students face unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Buddhist approaches to mental wellness can be helpful.



## 6. Meeting Buddhist Spiritual Needs

Research indicates that Buddhist college students particularly benefit from:

**Contemplative Practices:** Meditation, mindfulness, and other contemplative practices help students develop emotional regulation, stress management, and cognitive clarity.

**Ethical Framework:** The Buddhist emphasis on intention, speech, and action provides students with tools for navigating complex moral decisions.

**Community Connection:** Opportunities to practice with others and develop spiritual friendships combat isolation and provide mutual support.

**Meaning-Making:** Buddhist teachings on impermanence, interdependence, and the nature of suffering help students process difficult experiences and find purpose in their studies and life choices.

**Ritual and Ceremony:** Cultural heritage Buddhists may especially benefit from traditional ceremonies such as Lunar New Year and Vesak celebrations, which preserve important cultural arts and family traditions.



## 7. Practical Applications of Contemplative Care



In working with Buddhist college students, contemplative care might look like:

- **Presence During Crisis:** A Buddhist chaplain offers steady presence and deep listening rather than immediate solutions.
- **Mindful Check-ins:** Regular opportunities for students to simply be heard and witnessed in their current experience, without agenda.
- **Sacred Conversation:** Creating opportunities for students to explore the spiritual dimensions of their lives.
- **Contemplative Dialogue:**

Facilitating group conversations that combine intellectual exploration with mindful presence and heart-centered sharing.

## 8. Building Intentional Community and Spiritual Friendship

One of the most important aspects of Buddhist college chaplaincy is fostering authentic spiritual community (sangha) that can provide support, inspiration, and accountability for practitioners.

*Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, 'This is half of the holy life, lord: spiritual friendship, admirable companionship.'*

*'Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Spiritual friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life.'*

—*Samyutta Nikaya (SN) 45.2*

## Skillful Methods for Fostering Spiritual Friendship

- **Peer Support Networks:** Create opportunities for students to connect with and support one another through practice groups, study circles, and informal gatherings.
- **Mentorship Programs:** Pair experienced practitioners with newcomers to provide guidance and encouragement in developing a sustainable practice.
- **Inclusive Leadership:** Empower students to take leadership roles in organizing events, leading practices, and shaping the community.
- **Community Practices:** Regular shared meditation sessions, Dharma discussions, and contemplative activities that bring students together.

## 9. Specific Practices to Build Strong Buddhist Communities

- **Regular Gatherings:** Weekly meditation sessions, Dharma talks, and community meals that provide consistent opportunities for connection.
- **Ritual and Ceremony:** Celebrations of Buddhist holidays, traditional ceremonies adapted for college contexts, and marking significant transitions in students' lives.
- **Service and Engagement:** Opportunities for engaged Buddhism through community service, social justice work, and environmental activism.
- **Field Trips:** Visits to local temples, monasteries, and Buddhist centers to connect students with wider Buddhist communities.
- **Retreats:** Day-long or weekend retreats that allow for deeper practice and stronger community bonds away from campus distractions.



## 10. Navigating Interfaith Contexts

Buddhist chaplains often work in multifaith environments, which presents both challenges and opportunities.

### Common Challenges

- Balancing authenticity with accessibility
- Addressing categorization: Buddhism as philosophy, as religion, or as path
- Navigating different understandings of concepts like meditation and compassion
- Working within institutional structures developed for theistic traditions

### Unique Contributions

- Contemplative practices that benefit people from all backgrounds
- Non-theistic approaches to spirituality and meaning-making
- Emphasis on present-moment awareness and mindful living
- Ethical frameworks based on understanding interconnection



## 11. Buddhist Holidays



Buddhist Chaplains are often asked for a list of Buddhist holidays, to be added to the University religious calendar. However, the matter is complex in that: 1) Buddhist holidays vary according to the lineage of the practitioner. 2) Buddhist holidays are traditionally defined by lunar calendars, and then may be transposed onto the nearest weekend. 3) In addition, there are culturally based holidays, such as the lunar new year, for which significant commemorations are held in Buddhist temples. There are no Buddhist-specific holidays that require study accommodations from the university.

### 2026 Buddhist Holiday Calendar

*Note: Dates are based on lunar cycles and may vary by lineage.*

Holiday	2026 Date(s)	Key Practices
<b>Lunar New Year</b>	Feb 17	Temple visits, family gatherings.
<b>Losar</b>	Feb 18–20	Lighting butter lamps, traditional dumplings and soup.
<b>Hanamatsuri</b>	April 8	Bathing the baby Buddha in sweet tea.
<b>Songkran</b>	April 13–15	Water rituals, paying respect to elders.
<b>Vesak</b>	May 1 or 31	Birth, death, and enlightenment of Buddha.
<b>Saga Dawa</b>	May 31	Pilgrimages, donations, vegetarianism.
<b>Chuseok</b>	Sept 25	Harvest festival, honoring ancestors.
<b>Bodhi Day</b>	Dec 8	Western calendar commemoration of the Buddha's enlightenment.

- **Lunar New Year (date subject to change/ February 17-20 2026)** The Chinese and Vietnamese New Year is celebrated by visiting temples, lion dances, family gatherings and firecrackers.
- **Losar (date subject to change/ Feb 18-20, 2026)** The Tibetan New Year is celebrated by visiting temples, lighting butter lamps, cultural performances, family gatherings, momos and traditional noodle soup.

- **Hanamatsuri/ Buddha's Birthday, Japan (date subject to change/ April 8, 2026)** On this date, Japanese temples celebrate the Buddha's birth by bathing the baby Buddha in sweet tea, and through a festival of flowers.
- **Theravadin New Year/ Songkran (date subject to change/ April 13-15, 2026)** Songkran, also known as the Thai New Year, is a vibrant and joyous Buddhist holiday celebrated in Thailand and several other Southeast Asian countries. Lasting for three days in mid-April, the festival marks the transition from the dry season to the traditional Thai New Year and is characterized by its exuberant water rituals. Songkran is also a time for paying respects to elders and visiting temples, where offerings and prayers are made to bring good luck and prosperity for the year ahead. This cherished celebration embodies the essence of unity, joy, and spiritual reflection, making it an unforgettable experience for all who take part in its festivities
- **Buddha's Birthday, Korea (date subject to change/ May 24, 2026)** In Mahayana traditions, Buddha's Birthday, Enlightenment, and Parinirvana are celebrated with distinct holidays. In Korea, many lotus lanterns are hung, and there are cultural performances and special services at the temples.
- **Vesak (date subject to change/ May 1 or May 31, 2026)** Also known as Buddha's Day, this Theravada Buddhist festival observes the birth, death, and enlightenment of the Buddha on the full moon of the second lunar month. This is primarily celebrated in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. In Mahayana Buddhist countries, especially in Northeastern Asia, the birth of the Buddha alone is normally celebrated on Vesak.
- **Saga Dawa Duchen (Date subject to change/ May 31, 2026)** Tibetan Buddhists celebrate the birth, enlightenment and death (parinirvana) of the Buddha during Saga Dawa, the fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. During this time temples are visited, pilgrimages are made, and donations are given to monasteries and to the poor. Meat is not eaten and captive animals may be set free. The full moon is considered the most significant time for observances.
- **Chuseok/ Mid-Autumn Festival (date subject to change/ Sept 25, 2026).** Chuseok and Mid-Autumn festivals are harvest festivals at which the ancestors are honored, often in the countryside, and traditional foods are enjoyed.
- **Bodhi Day/ Enlightenment Day (December 8<sup>th</sup> on the Gregorian calendar)** Bodhi Day celebrates the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautam (Shakyamuni Buddha), awakening to become the Buddha while sitting under the Bodhi tree. He realized the root of suffering and how to be free of it. It is either celebrated on the 8th of December or on the 8th day of the 12th lunar month, in other calendars. It is often observed with meditation and study.



## 12. Resources for Further Exploration

### Buddhist Organizations Supporting Campus Ministry

- **[Maitreya Association for Buddhist Campus Chaplains](#)**: A nonprofit organization supporting Buddhist spiritual care providers in higher education settings.
- **Buddhist Chaplaincy Programs**: Various universities now offer graduate programs in Buddhist chaplaincy and contemplative care.

### Essential Texts and Readings

- **Arts of Contemplative Care**: Pioneering voices in Buddhist chaplaincy and pastoral work, edited by Cheryl A. Giles and Willa B. Miller.
- **Classical Buddhist Texts**: The Pali Canon selections on kalyāṇamitra (spiritual friendship), Heart Sutra, and teachings on compassion.
- **Contemporary Buddhist Teachers**: Works by Thich Nhat Hanh on engaged Buddhism, Jack Kornfield on Buddhist psychology, and Pema Chödrön on working with difficult emotions.

### Contemplative Practices for Students

- **Mindfulness Meditation**: Basic awareness practices suitable for beginners, including breath meditation and body scans.
- **Loving-Kindness Practice (Metta)**: Cultivation of compassion toward self and others, particularly helpful during stressful periods.
- **Walking Meditation**: Moving contemplative practice that can be integrated into daily campus life.
- **Contemplative Study**: Methods for bringing mindful awareness to academic reading and intellectual inquiry.

## Conclusion

Buddhist spiritual care in higher education represents a unique opportunity to bring ancient wisdom into conversation with contemporary challenges. Through contemplative care, building intentional communities, and skillful engagement with diverse campus environments, Buddhist chaplains and student leaders can provide invaluable support for spiritual development and wellbeing.

The ultimate goal remains the reduction of suffering and the cultivation of wisdom and compassion—both for individual students and for the college community as a whole. May this guide serve as a resource for fostering authentic spiritual care and meaningful Buddhist practice in higher education. For further information, please reach out to us at Maitreya Association: [contact@maitreyaassociation.org](mailto:contact@maitreyaassociation.org).