

How do Buddhists handle coronavirus? The answer is not just meditation

15 May 2020, by Pierce Salguero



The Dalai Lama, the Buddhist spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. Credit: [Pixabay](#)

Millions of Buddhists seeking protection and healing from the novel coronavirus are turning to traditional religious rituals.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, [the Dalai Lama](#), other [senior monks](#) and [Buddhist organizations](#) in Asia and worldwide have emphasized that this pandemic calls for meditation, compassion, generosity and gratitude. Such messages reinforce a common view in the West of Buddhism as more philosophy than religion—a spiritual, perhaps, but secular practice associated with [mindfulness, happiness and stress reduction](#).

But for many people around the world Buddhism is a religion—a belief system that includes strong faith in supernatural powers. As such, Buddhism has a large repertoire of healing rituals that go well beyond meditation.

Having studied the interplay between [Buddhism and medicine](#) as a [historian and ethnographer](#) for the past 25 years, I have been documenting the role these [ritual](#) practices play in the coronavirus pandemic.

Talismans, prayer and ritual

Buddhism originated in India about two and a half millennia ago. Today, with [well over a half-billion adherents across the world](#), it is a highly diverse tradition that has adapted to many cultural and social contexts.

There are [three main schools of traditional Buddhism](#): Theravāda, practiced in most of Southeast Asia; Mahāyāna, the form most prevalent in East Asia; and Vajrayāna, commonly associated with Tibet and the Himalayan region.

In Buddhist-majority places, the official COVID-19 pandemic response includes conventional emergency health and sanitation measures like recommending [face masks](#), hand-washing and [stay-at-home orders](#). But within religious communities, Buddhist leaders also are using a range of ritual apotropaics—magical protection rites—to protect against disease.

In Thailand, for example, [Theravāda temples are handing out "yant,"](#) talismans bearing images of spirits, sacred syllables and Buddhist symbols. These blessed orange papers are a [common ritual object among Buddhists in Southeast Asia](#) who see crises such as epidemic illnesses as a sign that demonic forces are on the rise.

Theravāda amulets and charms trace their magical

powers to repel evil spirits not only to the Buddha but also to beneficial nature spirits, demigods, charismatic monks and [wizards](#).

Now, these blessed objects are being specifically formulated with the intention of protecting people from contracting the coronavirus.

Mahāyāna Buddhists use similar sacred objects, but they also pray to a whole pantheon of buddhas and bodhisattvas—another class of enlightened beings—for protection. In Japan, for example, Buddhist organizations have been conducting [expulsion rites](#) that call on Buddhist deities to help rid the land of the coronavirus.

Mahāyāna practitioners have faith that the blessings bestowed by these deities can be transmitted through statues or images. In a modern twist on this ancient belief, a priest affiliated with the Tōdaiji temple in Nara, Japan, in April tweeted a [photo of the great Vairocana Buddha](#). He said the image would protect all who lay eyes upon it.

The third major form of Buddhism, Vajrayāna, which developed in the medieval period and is widely influential in Tibet, incorporates many rituals of earlier traditions. For example, the [Dalai Lama](#) has urged practitioners in Tibet and China to chant mantras to the bodhisattva Tārā, a female goddess associated with compassion and well-being, to gain her protection.

Vajrayāna practitioners also advocate a unique form of visualization where the practitioner generates a vivid mental image of a deity and then interacts with them on the level of subtle energy. Responses to COVID-19 suggested by leading figures in [traditional Tibetan medicine](#) frequently involve this kind of visualization practice.

Buddhist modernism

Since the height of the colonial period in the 19th century, "[Buddhist modernists](#)" have carefully constructed an international image of Buddhism as a philosophy or a psychology. In emphasizing its [compatibility with empiricism and scientific objectivity](#) they have ensured Buddhism's place in the modern world and paved the way for its

popularity outside of Asia.

Many of these secular-minded Buddhists have dismissed rituals and other aspects of traditional Buddhism as "[hocus pocus](#)" lurking on the fringes of the tradition.

Having documented the richness of the [history](#) and [contemporary practice](#) of Buddhist healing and protective rituals, however, I argue that these practices cannot be written off quite so easily.

In most living traditions of Buddhism, protective and healing rituals are taken seriously. They have sophisticated doctrinal justifications that often focus on the healing power of belief.

Increasingly, researchers are agreeing that faith in itself plays a role in promoting health. The anthropologist Daniel Moerman, for example, has identified what he calls the "meaning response." This model accounts for how cultural and social beliefs and practices lead to "[real improvements in human well-being](#)." Likewise, Harvard Medical School researcher Ted Kaptchuk has studied the neurobiological mechanisms for [how rituals work to alleviate illnesses](#).

To date, there is no known way to prevent COVID-19 other than staying home to avoid contagion, and no miracle cure. But for millions worldwide, Buddhist talismans, prayers and protective rituals offer a meaningful way to confront the anxieties of the global coronavirus pandemic, providing comfort and relief.

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