



Death and mourning info sheet

Theravada communities

The role of monastics

The special role played by monastics is to uphold the traditions and practices of the Buddhist religion. [...] The second role of the monks, which is highly valued by the community, is the task of saying prayers for the dead, conducting funerals and supporting the bereaved. Death is perhaps the most important moment in a Buddhist's life. Since Buddhists believe in rebirth, for them death marks the gateway to another life. The way we live and the way we die, and the genuine prayers of loved ones, affect the type of rebirth that we may have. For these reasons, monks are very much appreciated for helping ease the passage to a better rebirth. They receive alms on behalf of the dead so that merit (good karma) can be transferred to them.¹

The funeral

Theravada Buddhist funerals involve a shrine with the deceased person's picture and an image of the Buddha surrounded by candles, flowers and incense. [...] Theravada Buddhists usually cremate the dead person, following the example of Gautama Buddha, but the person may also be buried. Family members usually help during the ceremony by carrying the person and lifting them up, which marks the final stage of the funeral.²

Death and rebirth

In Theravada philosophy, rebirth is considered to take place in the moment immediately following the moment of death. The final moment of consciousness in one life is the immediate causal link to the first moment of consciousness in the next life. The gap between two lives is similar to the gap that exists between any two moments of consciousness in life. There is no intermediate state between one life and the next; the transition is instantaneous.³

¹ Discovering Buddhism, Dominique Side, p. 187

² BBC Bitesize

³ Discovering Buddhism, Dominique Side, p. 129



Questions

1. What do monastics do when someone passes away?
2. How do family members make sure the deceased person gets good karma and therefore a good rebirth?

Mahayana

Japan

After death, the body is usually cremated. The funeral often takes place a few days later to allow the first stage of rebirth to occur. In Japan, when a body has been cremated, relatives retrieve the bones from the ashes and place them in the burial urn, feet first ensuring they are not upside down. The urn is then buried in a family grave or temple.⁴

Tibet

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is read to people who are dying or recently deceased. Even if the person has already died, it is believed to assist the departed soul in moving between rebirths. Not all Tibetan traditions use the Book of the Dead, but all will chant guidance and wisdom to the dead and dying as they move towards their next rebirth.

Tibet is mountainous and finding a suitable burial site or enough firewood for cremation can be hard. Therefore, a 'sky burial' may take place. This is when the body of the deceased is placed high up on a hill or mountain so that it can be eaten by vultures. Monks chant mantras around the body.

Once this has happened, the remains of the body are collected and burned. Prayers are said and lamps are offered every seven days. A sky burial is regarded as a lesson in impermanence as the body is given up. It is also seen as a last act of generosity in feeding the vultures.⁵

Death and rebirth – the Vajrayana view

For a brief instant at death the deluded mind dissolves, and what continues is the primordial mind that is universal and not specific to any individual. If one recognizes the primordial mind for what it is, one is instantly enlightened. However, unless one has learned to control the mind through spiritual practice, this moment will not last very long and karmic patterns will arise again and sweep one along in a strong current

⁴ BBC Bitesize

⁵ BBC Bitesize



of thoughts and emotions. That chain of deluded thoughts and emotions is the causal link to the next rebirth.⁶

According to the Tibetan tradition rebirth is not immediate, rather it occurs after an intermediate period called bardo. 'Bardo' means 'interval' and here it refers to the interval between one life and the next. This interval varies in length from a few days up to 49 days, depending on karma and the deceased's state of mind, and Buddhists will generally conduct prayer ceremonies for the deceased for 49 days.⁷

Questions

1. What is most commonly done to bodies
 - a. In Japan?
 - b. In Tibet?
2. What is the main difference in the process of rebirth in Theravada and Mahayana beliefs?



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⁶ Discovering Buddhism, Dominique Side, p.130

⁷ Discovering Buddhism, Dominique Side, p.131