

Buddhist Funeral Traditions

Buddhists believe death is a natural part of the life cycle. They believe that death simply leads to rebirth. This belief in reincarnation – that a person’s spirit remains close by and seeks out a new body and new life – is a comforting and important principle. For Buddhists death is not the end of life, so it is not something to be feared. Where and how a person is reborn depends on their good and bad actions in past lives.

Karma

According to Buddhism, everything that happens is the result of *Karma* – the law of cause and effect. Every action throughout a person’s lifetime, both good and bad, has an effect on their future. The way a person lives his or her life also affects the way they die. So it is very important for a Buddhist to prepare for death by living in a good and kind manner. They are encouraged to be true to themselves and to care for and about those around them. This is how they can achieve calmness and control at their time of death.

Making Every Moment Count

Within the Buddhist community, death has important religious meaning. It marks the moment when new life begins through rebirth. For those left behind, it is a powerful reminder of Buddha's teachings. Every Buddhist must be prepared for death, because it can happen at any time. Because of this, it is important to make every moment count. Human birth is precious, and life has great value.

When death is near, Buddhists are taught to think about their holy writings. Giving one’s final thoughts to Buddha and his teachings brings good luck to a new existence.

Funeral Customs

After death, relatives and friends pour water over one hand of the deceased in a bathing ceremony. They then place the body in a casket and surround it with wreaths, candles and sticks of incense. If possible, a photograph of the deceased is placed alongside and colored lights are hung around the casket.

Since Buddha's death, many Buddhists have chosen cremation to free the soul from the body. Because they believe that several stages of life called *bardos* continue for hours or days after the body dies, cremation does not take place right away. Sometimes, it is delayed to wait for distant relatives to arrive or to show special honor to the dead. In these cases, monks come to the house one or more times each day to chant (sing). Food is offered to the monks to increase the importance of the dead person.

Frequently the body of a famous or rich person is kept for a year or more in a special building at a temple. Waiting this long before cremation shows respect and allows time for religious ceremonies that will benefit them in the afterlife. When this happens, memorial services are held on the

seventh, fiftieth and hundredth days after death. As long as the body is present, the spirit can benefit from gifts presented, talks given and chants sung for it. After cremation, the spirit is cut off from our world.

On the day of cremation, a man carrying a white banner on a long pole leads the procession to the place where cremation is to take place. He is followed by elderly men carrying flowers in silver bowls. Next, a group of eight to ten holy men (monks) hold a broad ribbon that extends to the casket behind them. The casket may be carried by people or pulled in a funeral car by a large number of friends and relatives who feel that they are doing their last good deed for the dead person. During the ceremony at the cemetery, monks sit facing the casket and lead the mourners in song-like prayers. The casket is then placed on a brick structure and friends and family throw lit candles, incense and wood beneath the casket to start it burning. Later the ashes are collected and kept in a container called an urn.

A Buddhist funeral is a serious and dignified ceremony. Those left behind share their grief and learn to live a new life without a loved one.

Remembrances

The Japanese Buddhist tradition o-bon, or "bon," is a season when the living commemorate, honor and celebrate the spirits of family members who have passed. Bon usually takes place during summer months, when ancestral spirits are thought to return to visit relatives and friends. Families visit and clean gravesites during this time of remembrance, which is also marked by religious and cultural heritage festivals featuring dancing, Japanese foods and processions through cemeteries.

At bon festivals, bon-odori group dances that express joy for departed souls are performed in traditional colorful kimonos. The dance takes place around a stage that is roped off with lit lanterns overhead, which serve as beacons to the deceased to come and join the celebration.