

Buddhist Ceremonies and Funeral Rites

Source: http://www.buddhanet.net/d_cermon.htm

The early Buddhists followed the Indian custom of burning the body at death. The Buddha's body was cremated and this set the example for many Buddhists, even in the West. When someone is dying in a Buddhist home, monks come to comfort them by chanting verses to them, such as:

"Even the gorgeous royal chariots wear out; and indeed this body too wears out. But the teaching of goodness does not age; and so Goodness makes that known to the good ones."

After death, while the dead person is being prepared for the funeral fire, the monks continue to chant in order to help the dead one's good energies to be released from their fading personality.

The monks come with the family to the funeral. The family and all their friends give food and candles to the monks. Goodwill is created by these gifts and it is believed that the goodwill helps the lingering spirit of the dead person.

▶ [Death and Dying in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition](#)

In Tibet the day of death is thought of as highly important. It is believed that as soon as the death of the body has taken place, the personality goes into a state of trance for four days. During this time the person does not know they are dead. This period is called the First Bardo and during it Lamas (monks) saying special verses can reach the dead person.

It is believed that towards the end of this time the dead person will see a brilliant light. If the radiance of the Clear Light does not terrify them, and they can welcome it, then the person will not be reborn. But most flee from the Light, which then fades.

The person then becomes conscious that death has occurred. At this point the Second Bardo begins. The person sees all that they have ever done or thought passing in front of them. While they watch they feel they have a body but when they realize this is not so, they long to possess one again. Then comes the Third Bardo, which is the state of seeking another birth. All previous thoughts and actions direct the person to choose new parents, who will give them their next body.

▶ [Chinese Buddhist Funeral Arrangements](#) - the form of the funeral ceremony.

▶ [Buddhist Funeral Rites as Practiced in Thailand](#) - and other South East Asian countries.

Dying is easy . . .

In Japan a form of Mahayana Buddhism called Zen is practiced. Japanese Zen masters sometimes know when they are going to die.

Once master Hofaku called his monks together and said: "This last week my energy has been draining - no cause for worry. It is just that death is near."

A monk asked: "You are about to die! What does it mean? We will go on living. And what does *that* mean?"

"They are both the way of things," the master replied.

"But how can I understand two such different states?"

Hofaku answered: "When it rains it pours," and then calmly died.

DEATH AND DYING IN THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRADITION

Compiled by: Ven. Pende Hawter

Contemplation and meditation on death and impermanence are regarded as very important in Buddhism for two reasons : (1) it is only by recognising how precious and how short life is that we are most likely to make it meaningful and to live it fully and (2) by understanding the death process and familiarizing oneself with it, we can remove fear at the time of death and ensure a good rebirth.

Because the way in which we live our lives and our state of mind at death directly influence our future lives, it is said that the aim or mark of a spiritual practitioner is to have no fear or regrets at the time of death. People who practice to the best of their abilities will die, it is said, in a state of great bliss. The mediocre practitioner will die happily. Even the initial practitioner will have neither fear nor dread at the time of death. So one should aim at achieving at least the smallest of these results.

There are two common meditations on death in the Tibetan tradition. The first looks at the certainty and imminence of death and what will be of benefit at the time of death, in order to motivate us to make the best use of our lives. The second is a simulation or rehearsal of the actual death process, which familiarizes us with death and takes away the fear of the unknown, thus allowing us to die skilfully. Traditionally, in Buddhist countries, one is also encouraged to go to a cemetery or burial ground to contemplate on death and become familiar with this inevitable event.

The first of these meditations is known as the nine-round death meditation, in which we contemplate the three roots, the nine reasonings, and the three convictions, as described below:

A. DEATH IS CERTAIN

1. There is no possible way to escape death. No-one ever has, not even Jesus, Buddha, etc. Of the current world population of over 5 billion people, almost none will be alive in 100 years time.
2. Life has a definite, inflexible limit and each moment brings us closer to the finality of this life. We are dying from the moment we are born.
3. Death comes in a moment and its time is unexpected. All that separates us from the next life is one breath.

Conviction: To practise the spiritual path and ripen our inner potential by cultivating positive mental qualities and abandoning disturbing mental qualities.

B. THE TIME OF DEATH IS UNCERTAIN

4. The duration of our lifespan is uncertain. The young can die before the old, the healthy before the sick, etc.
5. There are many causes and circumstances that lead to death, but few that favour the sustenance of life. Even things that sustain life can kill us, for example food, motor vehicles, property.

6. The weakness and fragility of one's physical body contribute to life's uncertainty.

The body can be easily destroyed by disease or accident, for example cancer, AIDS, vehicle accidents, other disasters.

Conviction: To ripen our inner potential now, without delay.

C. THE ONLY THING THAT CAN HELP US AT THE TIME OF DEATH IS OUR MENTAL/SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

(because all that goes on to the next life is our mind with its karmic (positive or negative) imprints.)

7. Worldly possessions such as wealth, position, money can't help
8. Relatives and friends can neither prevent death nor go with us.
9. Even our own precious body is of no help to us. We have to leave it behind like a shell, an empty husk, an overcoat.

Conviction: To ripen our inner potential purely, without staining our efforts with attachment to worldly concerns.

The second meditation simulates or rehearses the actual death process. Knowledge of this process is particularly important because advanced practitioners can engage in a series of yogas that are modelled on death, intermediate state (Tibetan: bar-do) and rebirth until they gain such control over them that they are no longer subject to ordinary uncontrolled death and rebirth.

It is therefore essential for the practitioner to know the stages of death and the mind-body relationship behind them. The description of this is based on a presentation of the winds, or currents of energy, that serve as foundations for various levels of consciousness, and the channels in which they flow. Upon the serial collapse of the ability of these winds to serve as bases of consciousness, the internal and external events of death unfold. Through the power of meditation, the yogi makes the coarse winds dissolve into the very subtle life-bearing wind at the heart. This yoga mirrors the process that occurs at death and involves concentration on the psychic channels and the channel-centres (chakras) inside the body.

At the channel-centres there are white and red drops, upon which physical and mental health are based. The white is predominant at the top of the head and the red at the solar plexus. These drops have their origin in a white and red drop at the heart centre, and this drop is the size of a small pea and has a white top and red bottom. It is called the indestructible drop, since it lasts until death. The very subtle life-bearing wind dwells inside it and, at death, all winds ultimately dissolve into it, whereupon the clear light vision of death dawns.

The physiology of death revolves around changes in the winds, channels and drops. Psychologically, due to the fact that consciousnesses of varying grossness and subtlety depend on the winds, like a rider on a horse, their dissolving or loss of ability to serve as bases of consciousness induces radical changes in conscious experience.

Death begins with the sequential dissolution of the winds associated with the four elements (earth, water, fire and air). "Earth" refers to the hard factors of the body such as bone, and the dissolution of the wind associated with it means that that wind is no longer capable of serving as a mount or basis for consciousness. As a consequence of its dissolution, the capacity of the wind associated with "water" (the fluid factors of the body) to act as a mount for consciousness becomes more manifest. The ceasing of this capacity in one element and its greater manifestation in another is called "dissolution" - it is not, therefore, a case of gross earth dissolving into water.

Simultaneously with the dissolution of the earth element, four other factors dissolve (see Chart 1), accompanied by external signs (generally visible to others) and an internal sign (the inner experience of the dying person). The same is repeated in serial order for the other three elements (see Charts 2-4), with corresponding external and internal signs.

CHART 1: FIRST CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

Factor dissolving	External sign	Internal sign
earth element	body becomes very thin, limbs loose; sense that body is sinking under the earth	
aggregate of forms	limbs become smaller, body becomes weak and powerless	
basic mirror-like wisdom (our ordinary consciousness that clearly perceives many objects simultaneously)	sight becomes unclear and dark	appearance of mirages
eye sense	one cannot open or close eyes	
colours and shapes	lustre of body diminishes; one's strength is consumed	

CHART 2: SECOND CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

Factor dissolving	External sign	Internal sign
water element	saliva, sweat, urine, blood and regenerative fluid dry greatly	
aggregate of feelings (pleasure, pain and neutrality)	body consciousness can no longer experience the three types of feelings that accompany sense consciousnesses	
basic wisdom of equality (our ordinary consciousness mindful of pleasure, pain and neutral feelings as feelings)	one is no longer mindful of the feelings accompanying the mental consciousness	appearance of smoke
ear sense	one no longer hears external or internal sounds	
sounds	'ur' sound in ears no longer arises	

CHART 3: THIRD CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

Factor dissolving	External sign	Internal sign
fire element	one cannot digest food or drink	
aggregate of discrimination	one is no longer mindful of affairs of close persons	
basic wisdom of analysis (our ordinary consciousness mindful of the individual names, purposes and so forth of close persons)	one can no longer remember the names of close persons	appearance of fireflies or sparks within smoke
nose sense	inhalation weak, exhalation strong and lengthy	
odours	one cannot smell	

CHART 4: FOURTH CYCLE OF SIMULTANEOUS DISSOLUTION

Factor dissolving	External sign	Internal sign
wind element	the ten winds move to heart; inhalation and exhalation ceases	
aggregate of compositional factors	one cannot perform physical actions	
basic wisdom of achieving activities (our ordinary consciousness mindful of external activities, purposes and so forth)	one is no longer mindful of external worldly activities, purposes and so forth	appearance of a sputtering butter-lamp about to go out
tongue sense	tongue becomes thick and short; root of tongue becomes blue	
tastes	one cannot experience tastes	
body sense and tangible objects	one cannot experience smoothness or roughness	

CHART 5: FIFTH TO EIGHTH CYCLES OF DISSOLUTION

Factor dissolving	Cause of appearance	Internal sign
FIFTH CYCLE		
eighty conceptions	winds in right and left channels above heart enter central channel at top of head	at first, burning butter-lamp; then, clear vacuity filled with white light
SIXTH CYCLE		
mind of white appearance	winds in right and left channels below heart enter central channel at base of spine	very clear vacuity filled with red light
SEVENTH CYCLE		
mind of red increase	upper and lower winds gather at heart; then winds enter drop at heart	at first, vacuity filled with thick darkness; then as if swooning unconsciously
EIGHTH CYCLE		
mind of black near-attainment	all winds dissolve into the very subtle life-bearing wind in the indestructible drop at	very clear vacuity free of the white, red and black

	the heart	appearances - the mind of clearlight of death
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(The above charts are taken from "Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism" by Lati Rinbochay and Jeffrey Hopkins)

Upon the inception of the fifth cycle the mind begins to dissolve, in the sense that coarser types cease and subtler minds become manifest. First, conceptuality ceases, dissolving into a mind of white appearance. This subtler mind, to which only a vacuity filled by white light appears, is free from coarse conceptuality. It, in turn, dissolves into a heightened mind of red appearance, which then dissolves into a mind of black appearance. At this point all that appears is a vacuity filled by blackness, during which the person eventually becomes unconscious. In time this is cleared away, leaving a totally clear emptiness (the mind of clear light) free from the white, red and black appearances (see Chart 5). This is the final vision of death.

This description of the various internal visions correlates closely with the literature on the near-death experience. People who have had a near-death experience often describe moving from darkness (for example a black tunnel) towards a brilliant, peaceful, loving light. A comprehensive study comparing death and near-death experiences of Tibetans and Euro-Americans has shown many similarities between the two (Carr, 1993). Care must be taken though in such comparisons because the near-death experience is not actual death, that is, the consciousness permanently leaving the body.

Since the outer breath ceased some time before (in the fourth cycle), from this point of view the point of actual death is related not to the cessation of the outer breath but to the appearance of the mind of clear light. A person can remain in this state of lucid vacuity for up to three days, after which (if the body has not been ravaged by illness) the external sign of drops of red or white liquid emerging from the nose and sexual organ occur, indicating the departure of consciousness.

Other signs of the consciousness leaving the body are 1) when all heat has left the area of the heart centre (in the centre of the chest), 2) the body starts to smell or decompose, 3) a subtle awareness that the consciousness has left and the body has become like 'an empty shell', 4) a slumping of the body in a practitioner who has been sitting in meditation after the stopping of the breath. Buddhists generally prefer that the body not be removed for disposal before one or more of these signs occur, because until then the consciousness is still in the body and any violent handling of it may disturb the end processes of death. A Buddhist monk or nun or friend should ideally be called in before the body is moved in order for the appropriate prayers and procedures to be carried out.

When the clear light vision ceases, the consciousness leaves the body and passes through the other seven stages of dissolution (black near-attainment, red increase etc.) in reverse order. As soon as this reverse process begins the person is reborn into an intermediate state between lives, with a subtle body that can go instantly wherever it likes, move through solid objects etc., in its journey to the next place of rebirth.

The intermediate state can last from a moment to seven days, depending on whether or not a suitable birthplace is found. If one is not found the being undergoes a "small death", experiencing the eight signs of death as previously described (but very briefly). He/she then again experiences the eight signs of the reverse process and is reborn in a second intermediate state. This can happen for a total of seven births in the intermediate state (making a total of forty-nine days) during which a place of rebirth must be found.

The "small death" that occurs between intermediate states or just prior to taking rebirth is compared to experiencing the eight signs (from the mirage-like vision to the clear light) when going into deep sleep or when coming out of a dream. Similarly also, when entering a dream or when awakening from sleep the eight signs of the reverse process are experienced.

These states of increasing subtlety during death and of increasing grossness during rebirth are also experienced in fainting and orgasm as well as before and after sleeping and dreaming, although not in complete form. It is this great subtlety and clarity of the mind during the death process that makes it so valuable to use for advanced meditation practices, and why such emphasis is put on it in Buddhism. Advanced practitioners will often stay in the clear light meditation for several days after the breathing has stopped, engaging in these advanced meditations, and can achieve liberation at this time.

The Buddhist view is that each living being has a continuity or stream of consciousness that moves from one life to the next. Each being has had countless previous lives and will continue to be reborn again and again without control unless he/she develops his/her mind to the point where, like the yogis mentioned above, he/she gains

control over this process. When the stream of consciousness or mind moves from one life to the next it brings with it the karmic imprints or potentialities from previous lives. Karma literally means "action", and all of the actions of body, speech and mind leave an imprint on the mind-stream. These karmas can be negative, positive or neutral, depending on the action. They can ripen at any time in the future, whenever conditions are suitable. These karmic seeds or imprints are never lost.

At the time of death (clear light stage) the consciousness (very subtle mind) leaves the body and the person takes the body of an intermediate state being. They are in the form that they will take in their next life (some texts say the previous life), but in a subtle rather than a gross form. As mentioned previously, it can take up to forty-nine days to find a suitable place of rebirth. This rebirth is propelled by karma and is uncontrolled. In effect the karma of the intermediate state being matches that of its future parents. The intermediate state being has the illusory appearance of its future parents copulating. It is drawn to this place by the force of attraction to its parent of the opposite sex, and it is this desire that causes the consciousness of the intermediate state being to enter the fertilized ovum. This happens at or near the time of conception and the new life has begun.

One will not necessarily be reborn as a human being. Buddhists describe six realms of existence that one can be reborn into, these being the hell realms, the preta (hungry ghost) realm, the animal realm, the human realm, the jealous god (asura) realm and the god (sura) realms. One's experience in these situations can range from intense suffering in the hell realms to unimaginable pleasures in the god realms. But all of these levels of existence are regarded as unsatisfactory by the spiritual practitioner because no matter how high one goes within this cyclic existence, one may one day fall down again to the lower realms of existence. So the aim of the spiritual practitioner is to develop his/her mind to the extent where a stop is put to this uncontrolled rebirth, as mentioned previously. The practitioner realises that all six levels of existence are ultimately in the nature of suffering, so wishes to be free of them forever.

The state of mind at the time of death is regarded as extremely important, because this plays a vital part in the situation one is reborn into. This is one reason why suicide is regarded in Buddhism as very unfortunate, because the state of mind of the person who commits suicide is usually depressed and negative and is likely to throw them into a lower rebirth. Also, it doesn't end the suffering, it just postpones it to another life.

When considering the spiritual care of the dying, it can be helpful to divide people into several different categories, because the category they are in will determine the most useful approach to use. These categories are: 1) whether the person is conscious or unconscious, and 2) whether they have a religious belief or not. In terms of the first category, if the person is conscious they can do the practices themselves or someone can assist them, but if they are unconscious someone has to do the practices for them. For the second category, if a person has specific religious beliefs, these can be utilised to help them. If they do not, they still need to be encouraged to have positive/virtuous thoughts at the time of death, such as reminding them of positive things they have done during their life.

For a spiritual practitioner, it is helpful to encourage them to have thoughts such as love, compassion, remembering their spiritual teacher. It is beneficial also to have an image in the room of Jesus, Mary, Buddha, or some other spiritual figure that may have meaning for the dying person. It may be helpful for those who are with the dying person to say some prayers, recite mantras etc. - this could be silent or aloud, whatever seems most appropriate.

However, one needs to be very sensitive to the needs of the dying person. The most important thing is to keep the mind of the person happy and calm. Nothing should be done (including certain spiritual practices) if this causes the person to be annoyed or irritated. There is a common conception that it is good to read "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" to the dying person, but if he/she is not familiar with the particular deities and practices contained in it, then this is not likely to prove very beneficial.

Because the death process is so important, it is best not to disturb the dying person with noise or shows of emotion. Expressing attachment and clinging to the dying person can disturb the mind and therefore the death process, so it is more helpful to mentally let the person go, to encourage them to move on to the next life without fear. It is important not to deny death or to push it away, just to be with the dying person as fully and openly as possible, trying to have an open and deep sharing of the person's fear, pain, joy, love, etc.

As mentioned previously, when a person is dying, their mind becomes much more subtle, and they are more open to receiving mental messages from those people close to them. So silent communication and prayer can be very helpful. It is not necessary to talk much. The dying person can be encouraged to let go into the light, into God's love etc. (again, this can be verbal or mental).

It can be very helpful to encourage the dying person to use breathing meditation - to let go of the thoughts and concentrate on the movement of the breath. This can be helpful for developing calmness, for pain control, for acceptance, for removing fear. It can help the dying person to get in touch with their inner stillness and peace and come to terms with their death. This breathing technique can be especially useful when combined with a mantra, prayer, or affirmation (i.e. half on the in-breath, half on the out-breath).

One of the Tibetan lamas, Sogyal Rinpoche, says that for up to about twenty-one days after a person dies they are more connected to the previous life than to the next one. So for this period in particular the loved ones can be encouraged to continue their (silent) communication with the deceased person - to say their good-byes, finish any unfinished business, reassure the dead person, encourage them to let go of their old life and to move on to the next one. It can be reassuring even just to talk to the dead person and at some level to know that they are probably receiving your message. The mind of the deceased person at this stage can still be subtle and receptive.

For the more adept practitioners there is also the method of transference of consciousness at the time of death (Tibetan: po-wa). With training, at the time of death, the practitioner can project his mind upwards from his heart centre through his crown directly to one of the Buddha pure realms, or at least to a higher rebirth. Someone who has perfected this training can also assist others at the time of death to project their mind to a good rebirth.

It is believed that if the consciousness leaves the body of the dead person through the crown or from a higher part of the body, it is likely to result in a good type of rebirth. Conversely, if the consciousness leaves from a lower part of the body this is likely to result in rebirth in one of the lower realms. For this reason, when a person dies it is believed that the first part of the body that should be touched is the crown. The crown is located about eight finger widths (of the person being measured) back from the (original) hairline. To rub or tap this area or gently pull the crown hair after a person dies is regarded as very beneficial and may well help the person to obtain a higher rebirth. There are special blessed pills (po-wa pills) that can be placed on the crown after death which also facilitates this process.

Once the consciousness has left the body (which, as mentioned earlier, can take up to three days) it doesn't matter how the body is disposed of or handled (including the carrying out of a post-mortem examination) because in effect it has just become an empty shell. However, if the body is disposed of before the consciousness has left, this will obviously be very disturbing for the person who is going through the final stages of psychological dissolution.

This raises the question of whether or not it is advisable to donate one's organs after dying. The usual answer given by the Tibetan lamas to this question is that if the wish to donate one's organs is done with the motivation of compassion, then any disturbance to the death process that this causes is far outweighed by the positive karma that one is creating by this act of giving. It is another way in which one can die with a positive and compassionate mind.

A Tibetan tradition which is becoming more popular in the West is to get part of the remains of the deceased (e.g. ashes, hair, nails) blessed and then put into statues, tsa-tsas (Buddha images made of clay or plaster) or stupas (reliquary monuments representing the Buddha's body, speech and mind). These stupas for instance could be kept in the person's home, larger ones could be erected in a memorial garden. Making offerings to these or circumambulating them and so on is regarded as highly meritorious, both for the person who has died and for the loved ones.

There are also rituals for caring for the dead, for guiding the dead person through the intermediate state into a good rebirth. Such a ritual is "The Tibetan Book of the Dead", more correctly titled "Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo".

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Traditional Chinese Funeral Arrangements

Lineage

On the passing away of the father, the eldest son becomes the head of the family. If the eldest son passes away, his second brother does not assume leadership of the family. Leadership passes to the eldest son of the eldest son or the grandson of the father. He must assume the responsibilities and duties to the ancestors on behalf of the family.

Form of the Funeral Ceremony

There are two main traditions that are observed:

1. The funeral ceremony, which traditionally lasts over 49 days, the first seven days being the most important. Prayers are said every seven days for 49 days if the family can afford it. If the family is in poor circumstances, the period may be shortened to from 3 to 7 days. Usually, it is the responsibility of the daughters to bear the funeral expenses. The head of the family should be present for, at least the first and, possibly the second, prayer ceremony. The number of ceremonies conducted is dependent on the financial situation of the family. The head of the family should also be present for the burial or the cremation.

2. In the second tradition, the prayer ceremony is held every 10 days. The initial ceremony and three succeeding periods of ten days until the final burial or cremation.

After 100 days a final prayer ceremony is conducted, but such a ceremony is optional and not as important as the initial ceremonies.

In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, to which most Chinese Buddhists subscribe, it is believed that between death and rebirth there is an intermediate period – called *Antarabhava* in Sanskrit, or the *Bardo* in Tibetan. It is an important period which has an influence on the form that the rebirth shall take. If the family ensures that proper assistance in the form of prayer and remembrance ceremonies are duly performed, the departed is better able to take a favourable rebirth.

Buddhist Funeral Rites in Thailand & other South East Asian Countries

Funeral rites are the most elaborate of all the life-cycle ceremonies and the ones entered into most fully by the monks. It is a basic teaching of Buddhism that existence is suffering, whether birth, daily living, old age or dying. This teaching is never in a stronger position than when death enters a home. Indeed Buddhism may have won its way the more easily in Thailand because it had more to say about death and the hereafter than had animism.

The people rely upon monks to chant the sutras that will benefit the deceased, and to conduct all funeral rites and memorial services. To conduct the rites for the dead may be considered the one indispensable service rendered the community by the monks. For this reason the crematory in each large temple has no rival in secular society.

The idea that death is suffering, relieved only by the knowledge that it is universal, gives an underlying mood of resignation to funerals: Among a choice few, there is the hope of Nibbana with the extinction of personal striving; among the vast majority there is the expectation of rebirth either in this world, in the heaven of Indra or some other, or in another plane of existence, possibly as a spirit. Over the basic mood of gloom there has grown up a feeling that meritorious acts can aid the condition of the departed. Not all the teaching of Anatta (not self) can quite eradicate anxiety lest the deceased exist as pretas or as beings suffering torment. For this reason relatives do what they can to ameliorate their condition.

According to tradition, when a person is dying an effort should be made to fix his mind upon the Buddhist scriptures or to get him to repeat one of the names of Buddha, such as Phra Arahant. The name may be whispered in his ear if the person is far gone. Sometimes four syllables which are considered the heart of the Abhidharma, ci, ce, ru, and ni, representing "heart, mental concepts, form and Nibbana" are written on a piece of paper and put in the mouth of the dying man. It is hoped that if the last thoughts of the patient are directed to Buddha and the precepts, that the fruit of this meritorious act will bring good to the deceased in his new existence. In a village, at the moment of death, the relatives may set up a wailing both to express sorrow and to notify the neighbours who will then come to be of help.

After death a bathing ceremony takes place in which relatives and friends pour water over one hand of the deceased. The body is then placed in a coffin and surrounded with wreaths, candles and sticks of incense. If possible a photograph of the deceased is placed alongside, and coloured lights are suspended about the coffin: Sometimes the cremation is deferred for a week to allow distant relatives to attend or to show special honour to the dead. In this case a chapter of monks comes to the house one or more times each day to chant from the Abhidharma, sometimes holding the bhusa yong, a broad ribbon, attached to the coffin. Food is offered to the officiating monks as part of the merit-making for the deceased.

The food offered in the name of the dead is known as Matakabhatta from mataka ("one who is dead"). The formula of presentation is:

Reverend Sirs, we humbly beg to present this mataka food and these various gifts to the Sangha. May the Sangha receive this food and these gifts of ours in order that benefits and happiness may come to us to the end of time.

At an ordinary funeral in northern Thailand the cremation takes place within three days. The neighbours gather nightly to feast, visit, attend the services and play games with cards and huge dominoes. The final night is the one following the cremation. On the day of the funeral an orchestra is employed and every effort is made to banish sorrow, loneliness and the fear of spirits by means of music and fellowship. Before the funeral procession begins the monks chant a service at the home and then precede the coffin down the steps of the house, - stairs which are sometimes carpeted with banana leaves. It is felt that the body should not leave the house by the usual route, but instead of removing the coffin through a hole in the wall or floor, which is sometimes done, the front stairs are covered with green leaves to make that route unusual.

A man carrying a white banner on a long pole often leads the procession to the crematorium grounds. He is followed by some elderly men carrying flowers in silver bowls and then by a group of eight to ten monks walking ahead of the coffin and holding a broad ribbon (bhusa yong) which extend to the deceased. Often one of the monks repeats portions of the Abhidharma en route. The coffin may be carried by pall bearers or conveyed in a funeral car drawn by a large number of friends and relatives who feel that they are performing their last service for the deceased and engaged in a meritorious act while doing so. If the procession is accompanied by music the players may ride in ox carts or in a motor truck at the rear. During the service at the cemetery the monks sit facing the coffin on which rest the Pangsukula robes. After the chanting the coffin is placed on a pyre made of

brick; the people then come up with lighted torches of candles, incense and fragrant wood and toss them beneath the coffin so that the actual cremation takes place at once. Later the ashes may be collected and kept in an urn.

Frequently the bodies of prominent or wealthy persons are kept for a year or more in a special building at a temple. Cremations are deferred this long to show love and respect for the deceased and to perform religious rites which will benefit the departed. In such cases a series of memorial services are held on the seventh, fiftieth, and hundredth days after the death. In one instance a wealthy merchant did not cremate the body of his daughter until he had spent all her inheritance in merit-making services for her. Another merchant spent the ten thousand baht insurance money received on the death of his small son entirely for religious ceremonies.

As long as the body is present the spirit can benefit by the gifts presented, the sermons preached and the chants uttered before it. This thought lies behind the use of the bhusa yhong ribbon which extends from the body within the coffin to the chanting monks before it. The dead may thus have contact with the holy sutras. When the body is cremated the spirit is more definitely cut off from the world, it is best therefore not to force that spirit to enter the preta world finally and irrevocably until it has had the benefit of a number of religious services designed to improve its status.

At cremations it is quite common for wealthy people to have printed for distribution books and pamphlets setting forth Buddhist teachings in the form of essays, translation of the sutras, historical sketches and explanations of ceremonies. Such books, numbering in the thousands, are not only a tribute to the dead and a means of making merit but they have practical value as well.