

# The Buddhists' Attitude towards Death

*This article is from a sharing by Dr. Wong Yin Onn to his Buddhist friends.*

The early Buddhists followed the Indian custom of cremation. The Buddha's body was cremated and this set the example for many Buddhists.

When someone is dying in a Buddhist home, monks and laypeople come to comfort them by chanting verses for them, and sharing the Dhamma. It is hoped that if the last thoughts of the patient are directed to Buddha and the Dhamma, taking refuge in the Triple Gems and Precepts, and recalling a virtuous life keeping the precepts, then the fruit of this meritorious act will bring good to the deceased in his/her new existence. The dying person must be put at ease from pain, and given a serene and familiar place to have a composed and calm mind. He and the family must be reassured that the wholesome acts done in the past will assure a good rebirth. He/she and the family must be counseled that Death is a natural process and merely a door to a new existence. Birth and Death are but 2 sides of a coin.

Anathapindika was once very ill, and at his request the Venerable Sariputta visited him (S.v,380). On being told that the pains are excruciating and increasing Sariputta delivered a discourse reminding Anathapindika of his own virtues. Sariputta explained that the uninstructed worldling who has no faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and who has not cultivated virtuous moral habits goes to a state of woe on the destruction of the body. But Anathapindika has unshakable conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and has cultivated noble moral habits.

Sariputta pointed out that uninstructed worldlings reach a state of woe on the disintegration of the body as they have not cultivated the Noble Eightfold Path. But on the contrary Anathapindika has cultivated the Noble Eightfold Path.

**We too must reassure our dying brethren on the above.**

There is much material in the Pali Canon on counseling the terminally ill. **Speaking about death to a terminally ill patient and his family is not avoided as an unpleasant topic.** On the contrary, the reality of death and perhaps its imminence are accepted without any pretense and the patient and relatives are made to face the prospect of death with confidence and tranquillity.

The family must be counseled to let go and **give permission for the dying to die without worries or insecurity.** They and Dhamma brothers and sisters can radiate Metta continuously to the dying person.

(A.iii,295-98). Once Nakulapita was seriously ill and his wife Nakulamata noticed that he was anxious and worried. She advised him thus:

“Please, sir, **do not face death with anxiety.** Painful is death for one who is anxious. **The Buddha has looked down upon death with anxiety.**

It may be you are anxious that I will not be able to support the family after your death. Please do not think so. I am capable of spinning and weaving, and I will be able to bring up the children even if you are no more.

Perhaps you are worried that I will remarry after your death. Please do not think so. We both led pure wholesome lives according to the noble conduct of householders. So do not entertain any anxiety on that account.

It may be you are worried that I will neglect attending on the Buddha and the Sangha. Please do not think so. I will be more devoted to the Buddha and the Sangha after your death.

Perhaps you are worried that I will neglect keeping to the precepts. Please do not have any doubts on that account. I am one of those who fully practice the moral habits declared for the laity, and if you wish please ask the Buddha about this matter.

Perhaps you fear that I have not gained inner mental composure. Please do not think so. I am one of those who have gained inner mental composure as much as a householder could gain. If you have any doubts about this, the Buddha is at Bhesakalavana, ask him.

Perhaps it occurs to you that I have not attained proficiency in the Buddha's dispensation, that I have not

gone beyond doubt and perplexity without depending on another. If you wish to have these matters clarified ask the Buddha. **But please do not face death with anxiety, for it is painful and censured by the Buddha.**"

## **Sudden Deaths**

Mahanama tells the Buddha that when he comes to the serene atmosphere of the monastery and associates with pious monks of noble qualities, he feels quite calm and self-possessed. But when he goes out into the streets of Kapilavatthu, busy with constant traffic, he feels frightened over the future birth that would await him should he meet with a violent death in a traffic accident.

The Buddha assures him that a person who has cultivated moral virtues and led a righteous life need not entertain such fears. He explains the situation with the help of a simile. If a pot of ghee is broken after being submerged in water, the potsherds will sink to the riverbed, but the ghee will rise to the surface. Similarly, the body will disintegrate, but the cultured mind will rise up like the ghee.

## **After Death**

After death, while the dead person is being prepared for the funeral, the monks and laypeople continue to chant to console the family and to help all recall the Dhamma. There will understandably be grief and lamentation but **calmness must be encouraged and maintained** as such negative emotional states will help no-one. Wailing and emotional outbursts are discouraged as this will only create more attachments for both the dying, the dead and the relatives.

**The mind that arises at the time of death is usually the one that the person is most habituated to.** People tend to die in character, although this is not always so. So it is emphasised strongly that the time to prepare for death is now, because if we develop and gain control over our mind now and create many positive causes we will have a calm and controlled mind at the time of death and be free of fear. In effect, our whole life is a preparation for death and it is said that the mark of a spiritual practitioner is to have no regrets at the time of death. "It's time we started swotting for the finals!"

## **The Funeral service**

Don't fall victim to funeral scams.

Firstly we must realise that there is NO prescribed Funeral rite that MUST be done; the only prescribed rites are in the Vinaya for the Sangha community only. Secondly, rites makes NO difference to the departed. The Buddha however did not stop anyone from acts of respect and love towards the departed. Wisdom tells us that a simple solemn dignified service showing respect to the dead is adequate; this allows a rite of passage for the relatives and loved ones who needs closure. Local traditions as long as it does not violate the precepts are allowed as it gives the friends and relatives a sense of doing "something" and to facilitate mourning.

In the pristine practice of Buddhism, **It should be as simple as possible.** Perhaps just a candle will do. Some may want to add incense or josticks. Whatever that is done, is not taught by the Buddha. **Whatever suits the tradition and culture of the deceased, it is all right, so long as it is done with dignity and without harm to any being.**

What is discouraged is meaningless and wasteful practises based on superstition and abuse by priests and funeral directors.

It is a basic teaching of Buddhism that existence is unsatisfactory and stressful, whether birth, daily living, old age or dying. This teaching is never in a stronger position than when death enters a home. **To conduct the rites for the dead is one indispensable service rendered the community by the monks, lay Brothers and sisters and any Buddhist Temple or society.**

## **What can we do to help**

When death occurs all the kammic forces that the dead person accumulated during the course of his or her lifetime become activated and set about determining the next rebirth. For the living, death is a powerful reminder of the Buddha's teaching on impermanence.

Over the basic mood of gloom is the feeling that meritorious acts can aid the condition of the departed. For this reason relatives do what they can to ameliorate the condition with the offering of Requisites to the Sangha on behalf of the deceased. In fact, **the Sanghikadana and sharing of Merits is the most important part of the funeral service.** In concluding the service, *a jug full of water is gradually emptied*

*into a bowl, while radiating thoughts of metta towards the departed one. This is a symbolic gesture in which the water in the jug represents the merits acquired by the friends and relatives by good deeds and metta, which are then shared with the departed by pouring the water into the bowl.*

It is quite common to print for distribution books sharing the Dhamma. Such books are not only a tribute to the dead and a means of making merit but they have practical educational value as well.

## **Offering of Food**

In Janussoni Sutta (AN 10.177), a brahmin named Janussoni asked the Buddha,

“Master Gotama, we brahmins give dana and do things in full faith, thinking, ‘May this dana reach our departed relatives. May the departed relatives make use of this dana.’ Master Gotama, can this dana reach our departed relatives? Can the departed relatives make use of the dana?”

The Buddha’s answer was:

“If there is an opportunity, they can. If there is no opportunity, then they cannot.”

He then clarified thus:

### **~ conditions of non-opportunity:**

- o those who do evil and hold wrong views and are reborn as hell beings
- o those who do evil and hold wrong views and are reborn as animals
- o those who refrain from evil and hold right views and are reborn as humans
- o those who refrain from evil and hold right views and are reborn as devas

### **~ condition of opportunity:**

- o those who do evil and hold wrong views and are reborn in the realm of ghosts.

**It is clear here that food dana can only reach the deceased if he is reborn as a ghost.**

In this sutta, we learn three important points:

- o The dana given by the living to the deceased cannot reach him if he is born in hell, in the animal kingdom, in the human world or even in heaven.
  - o The dana can only reach the deceased if he is born in the realm of ghosts.
  - o Dana here has to **specifically mean offering food and drinks to the departed relatives**, since this dana cannot be received by a departed one reborn as a deva.
- It is not the transference of merit because this other type of dana can reach a departed relative born as a deva, who benefits by feeling honoured.

BUT It would be difficult to know where a departed relative had been reborn. There is still a chance that he or she could have been reborn in the realm of ghosts. In such a case, the departed relative could eat the offerings.

Even if the departed relative was not born there, other ghosts who were related to one in previous lives could eat the offerings.

## **Sharing Merits with Devas**

In Pattakamma Sutta (AN 4.61) the Buddha said to Anathapindika that a noble disciple who acquired his income through righteous means should spend it by making five types of offerings. These are offerings to

- o living relatives
- o guests
- o **departed relatives**
- o the king (government)
- o **devas**.

There is also a verse in Ratana Sutta (Khp 6) that urges deities to protect humans because they make offerings to them day and night.

The above references bring us to the following conclusion: a Buddhist is actually encouraged by the Buddha to **make offerings to departed relatives as well as to devas**.

## **Dedication of Offerings to Devas**

In the story on the making of Pataliputta village found in Mahaparinibbana Sutta (DN. 16), the Buddha advised people to offer dana to virtuous monks and dedicate the offering to the devas there. These devas, being honoured and cherished, will honour and cherish the occupants of the house in return.

We can make two types of offerings: the direct offering of food and drinks to the departed ones, and the dana to the Sangha followed by sharing of merits. So, whether or not one's offerings are appreciated or used by the recipient does not affect the validity of the wholesome kamma of doing puja.

Recall that

“Good health is simply the slowest way a human being can die.”

1. Everyone must die...
2. The remainder of our life span is decreasing continually.
3. Death will come regardless of whether or not we have made time to practice the dharma.
4. Human life expectancy is uncertain.
5. There are many causes of death.
6. The human Body is very fragile.
7. Our wealth cannot help us.
8. Our loved ones cannot help.
9. Our body cannot help but grow old.

It is our conjecture that yearning for life is greatest when the fear of death is greatest. The fear of death is greatest when one's sense of guilt is greatest, the fear that one has squandered the great opportunity of human life, an opportunity which could have been well utilized for spiritual growth. **If, on the other hand, one has well utilized the opportunity of human life for spiritual growth, one can face the inevitability of death with relative calm, contentment and happy satisfaction.**

**It can also be very helpful to consider NOW how we would react if we were told, for example, that we only had 3 or 6 months to live, to ask ourselves questions like:**

- am I ready to die?
  - what unfinished business do I have?
  - what do I want to do or achieve in the time I have left?
  - will my priorities change?
  - what can help me at the time of death?
- “Live each day as though it were your last and one day you'll be right!”