

How a Theravadin Buddhist Chinese Funeral may be conducted

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First, a few words about what to do before death. As a person is seriously ill and near death, it is good to invite one or more monks to the bedside to give a Dhamma discourse, to chant Buddhist suttas, and to give the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. A Buddhist, having faith in his religion, would feel joy and comfort in seeing monks.

A Buddhist should try to keep his mind calm, peaceful, and mindful as he approaches death. He should reflect on the good deeds that he has done and arouse confidence that these deeds would give him a good rebirth and support him in his next life. He should accept death as a natural and inevitable phenomenon, reflecting that all of us come according to our kamma and we have to go according to our kamma. By gracefully letting go and accepting death, he would expire peacefully and hopefully gain a good rebirth in the heavenly realms or, if he returns to the world, he may be born to good parents and be an intelligent human being.

In view of the fact that we are owners of our kamma, it is important that while we are alive we do a lot of good deeds and live a wholesome life so that we may be assured of a happy rebirth on death. Of course, the final aim of all Buddhists is to attain Nibbana, which is the end of all rebirth. But until we uproot our mental defilements of greed, hate and delusion, we would still have to sojourn in samsàra, the rounds of birth and death.

Though it is understandable that there will be grieving and sorrow at the time of death, it is good for family members to restrain themselves from weeping and wailing before the dying person. This is because such tears and emotion will only upset the dying person making it more difficult for him or her to depart. One should allow a person to go peacefully, understanding that when one's time has come one has to go. Undue clinging and attachment will only conduce to more suffering. In fact, family members may assure the dying person that he need not worry about them, that he should keep his mind calm and peaceful, and that it is all right to go when his time has come. In this way, the dying person too may feel relieved and may expire peacefully.

When a person has died, the body should be cleansed and dressed. A simple and neat attire will do. Jewellery and ornaments, real or imitation, should not be worn. This is because the deceased has already taken rebirth and would not be able to take anything along with him.

As for the casket, it need not be expensive. It may be moderately priced or, if one is poor, a cheaply priced one will do as well. An understanding Buddhist would not want his family members to incur unnecessary expense. He would instead prefer that dāna or charity be done with the money that is saved through having a simple funeral.

A photograph of the deceased may be put before the casket. Flowers and wreaths may also be placed around the casket. Dhamma wordings, such as the last words of the Buddha: "**All conditioned phenomena are subject to dissolution. Strive on with diligence for the liberation from suffering**", may be put up as a form of edification and inspiration, so we may reflect and live meaningful lives.

There are many Chinese funeral traditions and taboos presently being adhered to in Chinese funerals. However, a Chinese Buddhist who wishes to hold a purely Theravadin Buddhist funeral, should discard many of these practices. With no disrespect or offence meant to those who wish to follow traditional Chinese funeral rites and rituals, the following advice is meant only for those who wish to follow a Theravadin Buddhist funeral: **There is no need for the Theravadin Buddhist to burn joss paper; no need to place a basin of water and towel under the casket (because the deceased can't possibly make use of this); no need to place a bowl of rice with chopsticks in front of the casket (because he can't partake of the food); no need to burn joss-sticks or candles before the**

casket; no need to hang a mosquito netting over the casket; no need to place decorative lightings around the casket; no need to distribute red threads to those who attend the funeral; doors may be closed at night when visitors have left, so family members may take a rest; after the funeral, there is no need to hold a house cleansing ceremony to ward away bad luck as this is just a superstitious practice; so too there is no need to wash one's face with "chanted" water because the Buddha has taught us that we should always have confidence in our own selves, that is, in our practice of the Dhamma, our practice of *dàna* (generosity), *sāla* (morality) and *bhàvanà* (meditation).

The Buddha taught that our true refuge or protection lies in the good kamma we create by doing good deeds, keeping precepts and meditating. Thus, if we have followed the Buddha's teachings in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path, we would already have had the best and true protection, and we should not at all resort to superstitious and un-Buddhistic practices.

We would encourage simplicity and wisdom, remembering that the deceased would already have taken rebirth, and if he had been a knowledgeable Theravadin Buddhist, he too would have wanted to do away with meaningless procedures. **Thus, there is no need at all for the burning of paper houses, paper cars, "hell" money, and other paper paraphernalia, together with the conducting of various rites and rituals, as all these would cost an astronomical sum of money which would be wholly wasted, as the deceased would not be able to benefit from any of these procedures.**

According to Theravada Buddhism, it is not possible that what is burnt here can materialise in another world. What is burnt just stays burnt. And it is also not possible, according to Theravada Buddhism, that the spirit can be guided from hell or some such location to heaven.

Thus, the importance of living a virtuous life can never be over emphasized, for when we die we can't expect to be "saved" by rites and rituals and the like. The money that is saved from the abandoning of unbeneficial rites and rituals can instead be used to do *dàna*, offerings of requisites to monks and temples, and donations to charitable institutions in memory of the deceased. So too, the family of the deceased can request that in lieu of wreaths, friends and relatives may make donations to charitable institutions. The merits made could then be dedicated to the deceased and to all beings.

There is no need for family members to wear specially made black or coarse mourning clothes. One could wear ordinary clothes, or wear white, or some grey or plain sober colour, to reflect the sombreness of the occasion. In Buddhism, we are taught by the Buddha to accept the fact of death, and not to mourn and lament. Crying and weeping, the Buddha said, would not bring back the dead but would only cause the living more suffering.

This, of course, does not mean that we should suppress or deny our grief. We are, as yet, not Buddhas or arahats who do not feel sorrow any more. So, what we can do is to be mindful, to acknowledge the sorrowful feelings that arise in us. We can shed tears. We can grieve. But through mindfulness and wise contemplation, we won't be overwhelmed by our sorrow. We can bear up gracefully, calmly. And we can reflect that the Buddha taught us that there is no permanent self or soul here. Ultimately, we do not even own ourselves. We are conditioned by ignorance and craving which create kamma which leads us on to rebirth.

The understanding Buddhist, reflecting on the teachings of the Buddha, and contemplating on the Four Noble Truths, would be further resolved to tread the Noble Eightfold Path to make an end of rebirth and suffering. He would be resolved to practise generosity, keep the five precepts, and undertake the practice of mindfulness and meditation to uproot mental defilements.

There is also no need for family members to turn their backs towards the casket when the deceased's body is being placed into it, or when the casket is being taken from the house to the hearse on the day of the funeral. There is no cause at all for the Theravadin Buddhist to observe such a practice which would, to our mind, be rather disrespectful or hurtful to the deceased should he have been able to observe what was going on. Instead the family members may stand, observing in respectful silence, as the casket is taken out of the house. They can reflect on the mortality

of the human condition — how all of us must one day die and how important it is for us to be kind and live a meaningful life while we are alive. Of course, they can also radiate good wishes to the deceased, wishing that he or she may be happy in his or her new rebirth.

Another out-of-place practice in the Theravadin context is the offering of food such as chicken, duck, roasted pork and vegetables before the deceased, especially at the time of paying the last respects normally observed in traditional Chinese funerals. Such offering is unnecessary because the deceased has taken rebirth and would not be able to partake of such food.

The practice of engaging a band to play some solemn music during the funeral procession is optional. **It is just as well if one wishes to observe noble silence.**

Burial or cremation is optional, though the latter would be more practical, less expensive, and preferable. What remains of the body after death is but a shell, the person having taken a new rebirth. And how long, one may ask, should the body be kept? **Cremation or burial can be done promptly, such as on the following day, or even on the same day.** However, a family may want to keep the body for several days for various reasons, such as to await the return of distant family members, or to allow relatives and friends to call to pay their last respects. Thus, the decision to bury or cremate as soon as possible, or to keep for a few days, is left to the discretion of the family members, or to the wish of the deceased if he had stated his desire before his death.

After cremation, what should one do with the ashes? The Chinese have a practice of placing the ashes in an urn in a columbarium. Myanmar Theravadin Buddhists normally leave the ashes behind at the crematorium for the attendants to dispose of, though some family members may also opt to collect the ashes and discard them into the sea or river. For the Malaysian Theravadin Buddhists, we would say (i) placing the ashes in a columbarium, (ii) leaving them behind together with the other remains for the crematorium attendants to dispose of, or (iii) discarding the ashes into the sea or river are all optional. If one opts for memorial purpose to place the ashes in a columbarium, there is no need to make any offerings or perform any rites or rituals over the urn containing the ashes. This is because the deceased has already taken rebirth and what is left is just ashes. Instead of performing meaningless rites, one could instead offer *dāna* at the temples and share the merits with the deceased.

Leaving the ashes behind or strewing them into the sea or river is also fine. For, as we have said, what is left are just remains, just elements of earth, water, wind, and fire. The person is not the bones or ashes. His consciousness has departed and taken rebirth in a new form. Thus, his ashes may be discarded, without any disrespect at all to be construed by any party. The Buddha's teaching is one of wisdom and non-attachment. **What we should do is to treat each other lovingly while we are alive, and after a loved one has passed away, we should continue to live a good life such that the deceased, if he could have been aware, would have been proud of us, proud that we are living a good life in accordance with the Buddha's teachings.**

If the body is kept for a few days before burial or cremation, monks (one or more) may be invited to the house to give a Dhamma discourse, to do some chanting of the Buddhist suttas, and to give the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. Buddhist friends can visit and do some chanting, too. They can also sit around and do some meditation in a group or hold a Dhamma discussion. There could be a special reading of the Dhamma from the scriptures. One could select appropriate and edifying Buddhist texts for the occasion. **Family members and friends can also give orations, recollecting the kind deeds and good nature of the deceased.** Thus, as one can see, it is up to each family concerned to conduct or initiate a meaningful kind of gathering and service. We can be creative and innovative in conducting a meaningful service as a form of paying honour to the deceased.

On the day of the funeral too, a monk or monks may be invited to do some chanting and to give the five precepts, after which they may also lead or follow the hearse in a separate car to the burial site or crematorium. Usually, there is a custom of offering robes to the monks as a form of merit-making. Family members may offer the robes to the monks either at the house before departure for the crematorium, or on arrival at the crematorium. The robes may be placed on top of the casket for the monks to remove as *paūsukula* (discarded) robes or they may be offered

directly to the monks. There is no hard and fast rule for many of these procedures.

One can adjust and modify, accordingly. After the robe offering, the monks will lead the family members in the sharing of merits with the deceased and with all beings. At the burial site or crematorium, the monks will also do a short chanting before the casket is lowered into the ground or conveyed into the cremation chamber.

Usually, the chanting is concluded with the following verse:

**Aniccà vata sankhàrà
Uppàda-vaya-dhammino
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti
Tesaū vupasamo sukho.
Impermanent are all conditioned things.
Of a nature to arise and pass away.
Having arisen, they pass away.
Their calming and cessation is true bliss.**

The calming and cessation here refers to the attainment of arahatthood — the highest stage of Buddhist sainthood. An arahat, having uprooted all craving, undergoes no more rebirth. If there is rebirth there will be dying again. If there is no rebirth, there is no more death. That cessation of rebirth is the cessation of suffering. It is true bliss.

If no monk is available, a family member, relative, or close friend may recite this verse at the crematorium. Other relevant suttas, such as the Pañicca Samuppāda or Salla Sutta may also be recited.

Sharing Of Merits

Sharing of Merits is a Buddhist tradition. After doing some good deeds, such as the offering of robes and food to monks, taking of precepts, making of donations, and so forth, the Buddhist dedicates the merits to the deceased person and to all beings, wishing that all beings may become enlightened, that they may exit from samsāra, that they may attain Nibbana, the end of rebirth and suffering. Dedication of merits is a good practice. It brings out the noble and selfless heart in us, the wish that our merits may, if possible, contribute to the enlightenment of all beings.

Can the merits we make really be shared with or transferred to another person? Can a deceased person receive our merits? **According to the Tirokudda Sutta, a discourse given by the Buddha, merits may be shared with hungry ghosts. If a person is reborn a hungry ghost, he may still be around.** Thus, if he is around and he rejoices over the good deed that has been done on account of him, then that act of rejoicing is itself a meritorious deed. And for the hungry ghost who has no other way of making merits, this act of rejoicing is a significant merit that can alleviate his suffering in the ghost world, and hopefully bring about for him a speedy new rebirth into a happier realm. **So, from here we can see that one needs to be aware in order to rejoice and, so to speak, “share” in the merits made. Thus, if one is reborn as an animal or a human being, one would be in the womb of one’s mother and would not be able to be aware of merits made by family members of one’s previous life.** So too if one is reborn in hell, for beings in the hell realm are, according to Theravada Buddhism, not in a position to be aware of what is going on in the earth realm. **It would also appear that devas in the heavenly realms would generally be similarly unaware. Perhaps the devas would be too preoccupied with their happy activities in their realms to be concerned about what we are doing here.** Besides, there is a difference in time span. According to the scriptures, a day in some deva realm is equivalent to some fifty years on earth!

So, we would think that generally only hungry ghosts may be aware of the merits made by relatives on account of them. Besides ghosts, we may venture to say that perhaps certain low earth-bound devas or spirits may also be aware since such spirits are said to reside in rocks and trees. Of course, we would not want our loved ones to be reborn as hungry ghosts in order to receive our merits! We wouldn’t want them to be in need of any such

merits. **Instead, we would want them to get a happy rebirth on death — to become human beings or devas, heavenly beings.** But in the event that such an unfortunate rebirth as a hungry ghost should have occurred to our loved ones, then the sharing of merits may be beneficial to them, if they should be present or become aware of our act or thought of sharing. Also, besides the deceased person, we can also share merits with all our departed relatives of this and previous lives. So, besides the immediate deceased person, other departed relatives who perchance could have become hungry ghosts, might be able to rejoice and benefit, too.

From the aforesaid discussion, one can see how important it is to live a good life while we are alive — to practise generosity, keep precepts, and do meditation; for our rebirth will be dependent on the deeds we do while we are alive. Finally, the merits we made are ours. The “sharing” with the deceased and all beings does not mean our merits are halved or lessened. We still get our due. Instead, the act of sharing itself is a meritorious deed. Thus, the dedication of merits towards the enlightenment of all beings is a good tradition that brings out the nobility and selflessness in us. **Theravadin monks do not charge any fees for their service. It is all done free, as part of their service to the community, or as a form of giving moral support to the family of the deceased. So, the monks do not at all expect any payment.**

The Chinese have a practice of performing certain rituals and prayers on the seventh day, 49th day, and 100th day after and on the anniversary of the deceased’s death. The Theravadin Buddhists should not, of course, follow rituals which are not in accord with the Dhamma. Instead, what the family can do, if they like, is to offer food and other requisites to monks at the temple so that merits may be shared with the deceased. Or they can do some good or noble deed, such as feeding the hungry, printing Dhamma books for free distribution, etc., in the hallowed memory of the deceased.

Yet another practice which should not be done by the Theravadin Buddhist is the holding of a spiritual seance through a medium to recall the “spirit” of the deceased. This is because such a practice is incompatible with Theravada Buddhist teachings. No one can say for certain where a person is reborn and furthermore, apart from the ghost world and earth-bound deva plane, communication with reborn beings in any other realms is generally out of the question.

In conclusion, we would reiterate that a Theravadin Buddhist funeral can be carried out in a simple manner, doing away with unnecessary spending, and meaningless rites and rituals. It is up to responsible family members to initiate a meaningful funeral service instead of letting professional undertakers dictate to them. Remember we can be innovative and creative with an emphasis on meaning and understanding. Donations too can be made to temples and charitable institutions in memory and honour of the deceased. The merits made can then be dedicated to the deceased and to all beings.

May all beings become enlightened and attain Nibbana, the end of rebirth and suffering.