Bidding Farewell
To Life
&
Beneficial Last Rites

Malaysian Buddhist Co-operative Society

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Foreword

Many times in your life you will attend the funeral of a dear friend or relation. A few times, you will be called to help arrange the ceremony. Eventually, your relations will be arranging the ceremony for you. The occasion of the death of a loved one is already difficult enough. When you also have to make decisions about the funeral ceremony, it can be like adding salt to an open wound. So I commend wholeheartedly this little booklet that takes away much of the pain and confusion of arranging a Buddhist funeral ceremony. What is presented here is well-informed guidance on how the Buddha would have recommended a funeral ceremony to be conducted—simple, respectful and meaningful.

When you have finished this excellent booklet, you will notice that many baseless superstitions have been well stripped away. Many expensive and meaningless rituals, which have only been added

in recent times, are removed as if cleaning off useless dust. You will read that it is better to give money to a charity, such as an aged person's home, than waste it on an extravagant funeral, and that it is better to sponsor a Dharma book than to sponsor the burning of paper money or houses (where the only thing that reaches heaven is the smoke). Those who arrange a Buddhist funeral ceremony should heed this wise advice and remember what the deceased one would have wanted for their family left behind.

In essence, a Buddhist funeral ceremony is to help the one who has died to progress on to a good rebirth, and also to help those left behind to learn more about the meaning of life and death. My teacher, Ajahn Chah, would often hold up his glass tumbler and tell us that the glass is of a nature to break. It is fragile. One day it will smash. But if the tumbler were made of plastic and unbreakable, then we wouldn't need to care. In just the same way, if your body was unbreakable, if you were to live forever, then you could be careless. But because we all will die, because our lives are fragile, that is why we must care! Those who attend a Buddhist funeral ceremony, of the type recommended in this book, will learn the importance of caring.

Ajahn Brahmavamso
PERTH, September 2004

Introduction

Every phase of life is a journey towards its destination—death. These phases of life, is usually remembered with ritualistic practice. For example, a birthday boy receives a toy; a couple receive a unique gift during their wedding anniversary etc. What about celebrating death? Can you celebrate it differently? If yes, how can you do it?

If you plan to use money, it is practically beneficial in knowing that your money can no longer buy any material gift to the deceased, but it can earn you extra money without spending heavily for the deceased funeral. If you plan to use sweet talk, it is sensibly correct in making the deceased happy through a eulogy by sharing with others about the deceased's unseen good deeds. If you plan to use repentance, you can plant a new purpose for yourself by emulating the deceased's good deeds.

As you can contemplate on the aforementioned thoughts to help a deceased or your loved ones to

celebrate death, you can save your money, your time and your life! In this deluded world, don't you think it is a mockery to let some noisy priest to be the centre of attention if the deceased should be the one to be remembered? Isn't it a waste not to let other people remember that the deceased has been an unsung hero? Isn't it worthwhile to breathe a new life and forget about your past or 'dead' opportunities in not being as who you have wanted to be always?

As you breathe in (living) and breathe out (dying) now, your body is telling you to rejoice in three things: impermanence (as death is normal), unsatisfactoriness (as others' good deeds are sometimes forgotten) and non-self (as not being your potential self). If you are one of those who keep on waiting in dilemma and remain undecided on how to celebrate someone's life with a funeral, isn't it ashamed to think that you have always been remembered by others for your phases of life?

As every day passes, another life is lost, and another life is made. When it is your loved one's turn, why not start learning about these three things and plan the celebration now with this all-in-one Buddhist Funeral Service booklet as your guide, specially written for you.

Acknowledgement

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Dhammajiwa Aw, MBCS

Facing & Embracing Death

When the radiance of the sun is dwindling, and the amber coloured sky welcomes the night, everything prepares for the evening ritual. Some flowers close their petals whereas some start to open and even emit fragrances. Birds hurry back to their nest perhaps with their latest meal of the day. Our mood changes too to prepare for a relaxing and cosy evening with friends and families. Such is the rhythm of our daily life; and such is the rhythm of our entire life too.

When the moment comes and final farewells are in the air, we too, are ready for our "nests", our closure and also a new beginning. Our nests are the warm embrace of family and friends, the assuring care and love of our loved ones. Our closures are our final biddings, farewells, saying "I love you" and perhaps overdue apologies. Finally, we are ready to bloom again with new motivation, serenity and constant faith in the Buddha.

For those who are preparing the final moments for a close relative or friend, they play a crucial

role in ensuring that their loved ones are well prepared for their new chapters. Creating an environment that is warm, loving, positive and with faith in the Buddha will certainly help them to embrace death serenely.

As a checklist, do ensure the following are done – for both the person and the family:

- Prepare a strong mental base: Taking and reaffirming Refuge in the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dhamma & Sangha).
- Creating a positive mentality: Getting advice or obtain counselling as necessary from monks/nuns or professionals.
- Ensuring a positive environment: Continuous attention from family and friends but not overpowering. Chanting of loving-kindness (metta) verses or other protection prayers by family and friends.
- (For family members) Prepare for the last-rites by contacting the care-takers.

Saying "Hello" to Death

When the sun is down, the evening stars and the moon begin to show their glory – faintly in the beginning but surely to full brightness as the sky darkens. On the stage, when the curtain is finally drawn, we have to bow graciously and as the spot light dims, we are ready to leave the stage. Perhaps emotions run high – either of relief that our work is done; or of reluctance because we will miss the stage and the audience.

In the final moments, we too may be overcome by emotions. But by holding firm to our faith in the Buddha's Path, remembering our positive contribution to our loved ones, family and friends, we too, are ready to bow graciously and to leave this stage confidently and satisfied.

As a person standing beside a dying relative or friend, we have to be like the stars in the evening sky. Continuously shining our love and assurance to the dying person. Continuously creating a positive environment by reciting the suttas or

playing the hymns. Our role is so important that he relaxes, bow and leave graciously. And we, as the stars, shine the path for him as he leaves the darkened stage.

These are some useful tips for both the dying person and those beside him:

- Prepare a strong mental base: Taking and reaffirming Refuge in the Triple Gem.
- Having a positive mentality: Reciting the suttas or playing selected hymns or chants that the dying person prefers. Having monks or nuns around certainly help.
- Having a positive environment: Being around the dying person gives confidence and love as he leaves this life.

Upon Death

When the person was alive, he may have made a pledge to donate his organs to save lives. These virtuous wishes should be fulfilled by the family members in his honour. On the practical side for post-death actions, here is a proposed checklist:

- Organ donation: If the deceased had pledged to donate his organs, do notify the relevant authorities within three hours upon death. Kidneys, liver, heart and lungs have to be harvested soon after death; whereas cornea can stand up to eight hours upon death.
- Practical dignity: Family members may clean and dress the body of the deceased. Let the deceased wear a simple yet dignified attire. Old cloths can be placed inside the coffin to absorb moisture.
- Final farewell: Recite the suttas as the body is being placed in the casket. There is no taboo about witnessing the action

of placing the body in the casket; it is a matter of paying respect to him. A member of the Buddhist fraternity or a member of the Sangha can conduct this event.

Last Rites – Simple, Solemn, Dignified

As night appears, plants and animals go about their routine at night; preparing for a new day. We too, prepare the deceased and for ourselves, a new dawn – that is the purpose of our Buddhist last rites.

Our Buddhist funeral's purpose is to nurture love, respect and confidence as well as faith in the Buddha for both the deceased and the living. Only by having these elements, can we say that the deceased's new journey is well lit and the family members' life will go on well. It is done in a simple, solemn and dignified manner to express bereavement and filial piety on the side of the family and meritorious for the deceased. Some practical suggestions are as follow:

Faith and respect:

- An altar with offerings (flowers, lights and incense) is set up in front of the casket. The deceased photograph is placed before it.
- A Buddha image is set up in front or beside the deceased's altar to respect his faith.

- Wreaths and banners received can be displayed in the hall.

Peaceful and radiant environment

- Hall should be serene and peaceful.

Practical and effective:

- Casket should be practical instead of expensive.
- Family members can wear white, plain or sober coloured attire to reflect the sombreness of the occasion. Need not be black throughout.

Positive messages:

- Monks should be invited to preside over the last rites with delivering of positive messages via a sermon, reciting the scriptures and transfer of merits. Member of the Buddhist fraternity can conduct this event too.

  This again, serves both the deceased and the living immensely

- Orations or eulogies – this could be done as a mark of respect and appreciation to the deceased. Senior family members, close friends or relatives could read the eulogies.

Do note that the Buddha's teachings do not prohibit fellow Buddhists from following their ethnic traditions and customs. However, we are

advised to refrain from performing wasteful and superstitious actions. Instead, resources and effort should be used to provide a positive, loving and dignified atmosphere for the occasion.

What about if you are the guest at a funeral? It's our duty to pay respect to the deceased and his family:

- Paying of last respect by standing in front of the altar and bow with clasped hand "anjali", or observe a moment of silence or paying respect with an incense.

  A prayer for the deceased should be made as we pay our respect.

- Guests should join the family members in reciting the suttas, listening to the sermon or observe silent moments when the session is on.

Final Acts

There is no rule to govern the number of days that the body should lie-in-state. Nor is there rule to suggest whether the body should be buried or cremated. The deceased or the family members have the liberty to make their choice. As in the last rites, the final act is meant to be simple, solemn and dignified to bring about a positive and loving environment.

Some common approaches:

Positive messages and declaration of faith

- Monks are invited to conduct the rites. Commonly, the rites contain the Affirmation of Refuge, the observance of the Five Precepts, the recitation of verses on impermanence and other protection verses.
- Offering of Requisites to the Sangha could be done – it reaffirms our commitment to the Buddha and His mission by supporting the Sangha through these requisites.

- Sharing of merit with the deceased is done after these recitations and offerings. In some traditions (Sri Lanka, for example), the family leader will perform “Dakkhinodoka” pouring of water as a mark of dedication of merit to the deceased.

Sealing the casket

- Sealing the casket and lifting it on to the hearse may be participated by the family members as this is the last opportunity for them to do service to the bodily remain of the deceased. At this moment, all should observe moments of silence as a last respect to the departed. As differing from some Chinese customs, there is no need to turn one’s back towards the deceased.

Funeral procession

- The funeral procession should be orderly and silent. Family members will normally walk behind the hearse as a mark of sending off the deceased. Friends and families can continue to radiate metta (loving kindness) and offer prayers to the deceased and the family members.

The Burial or Cremation Ceremony

At the end of our performance, we will have to leave not only the stage but the concert hall as well. Our audience too will have to leave for their homes. Lastly, our bodily remains will go to where we wish for—either to a burial ground or to be cremated so that our remains are free to enrich the earth or the sea again. The choice is ours to make. During a Buddhist burial or cremation ceremony, some sequence is common such as:

Devotion & sharing of merit

- Monks that have been invited could be offered a set of requisites (if not done already during the lie-in-state period). As this is a very meritorious act, the monks and the congregation will rejoice in this wonderful act and share the happiness and merit with the departed one. Verses of transference of merit will be recited.

Taking care of the bodily remains

- The casket will then be lowered for burial or be placed into the furnace at the crematorium; accompanied by recitation of the scripture.
- For cremation, the ashes can be collected on the following day to be kept in an urn and enshrined in a columbarium; or could be scattered on to the sea or on the ground.
- Monks can be invited for this final act—completion of the grave, cremation, installation of urn in the columbarium or scattering of the ashes on to the sea or on the ground.

Moving On!

After a show, people remember it. After sunset, people appreciate the stars and the moon. After the flowers fade away, new buds will form and will soon bloom again. Likewise, the deceased life will go on perhaps in another plane of existence; and the family members' life will move on albeit a little slow in the beginning.

No matter what, we know that life is a cycle and constant change is the only way to grow – both spiritually and materially. The Buddhist community takes this healing process and this important stage into consideration by having several post-funeral acts.

Common acts are as follow:

Continue his good work

- Money that has been donated by relatives and friends as a token of condolence can be used for many purposes such as to offset the funeral expenses (remember that a Buddhist funeral is a prudent one), for sharing the Dharma by

printing Dharma books and for helping those in need by donating to charitable organisations.

Memorial service –
Honouring and appreciating the departed

- Memorial service could be done by the family either by tradition (such as on the 3rd, 49th or 100th day after the death of the person) or at any time that deems fit.
- Some families hold memorial service during the death anniversary every year as a mark of honouring and appreciating the deceased. This is likened to the Chinese tradition of the Qingming ceremony.
- In both occasions, it should be done in the name of the deceased, such as:
  - Inviting monks for a meal offering (meal dana) either in the temple or in the house.
  - Sharing the Dharma by printing Dharma books or other communication media; or by direct donation to the temples.
  - Family and friends can be invited to join in this positive act. The joyous act and its benefits are to be appreciated and shared with the departed one.

This positive act of remembering the deceased create direct benefits for the family members while benefiting the deceased. It is always a loving act.

Summary of a Buddhist Funeral

As explained in the passages above, we can see that a Buddhist funeral is an act of love, gratitude which is beneficial and dignified. Some main features are summarised below:

- Affirmation of faith in the Triple Gem and our practice along the Path are the keystone to a Buddhist funeral. It provides the foundation for our lives direction; as well as for the deceased.
- Members of the Sangha and Buddhist elders preside over the funeral. They offer positive messages, encouragement and comfort.
- Simple, meaningful and economical to express bereavement. It is also solemn and dignified to express filial-piety. Expenses are for practical matters only; not for rites and rituals. The Buddha's message is free, it's invaluable!
- In agreement with traditional rites—minus the various superstitious rituals. One should however, take care of the traditional beliefs of the family members too; the best is to reach a consensus.

- It is a communal act with support from friends, families and temple members. Visitors take part in the Dharma sessions, in the recitation of holy verses and the solemn expression via hymns.

A common programme flow for the lie-in-state period is as follow:

- Assembly to be seated
- Sangha members to be seated
- Declaration of faith (Taking of Refuge) and administration of the Five Precepts
- Recitation of holy verses
- Sermon
- Orations or eulogies
- Asking for forgiveness (from the Triple Gem)
- Solemn and dignified hymns
- Offerings of requisites (such as robes)
- Transfer of merit.

Useful Numbers & Contacts

- MBCS Office, Petaling Jaya 03-78752808

Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam, Klang, Kuala Lumpur

- Bro Kelvin Lim 019-3355503
- Sis Didi Chan 019-3883718

Bukit Mertajam, Kulim, Lunas, Butterworth, Penang

- Bro Sim Boon Lee 012-4658349
- Bro Ooi Chin Wan 016-4884079

Johor Bahru

- Bro Chin Kian Hee 019-7627433

How MBCS can help you?

Members are reminded to contact MBCS representatives and not to commit with any offer of service from third party if members decided to get help from MBCS.

Further Readings

- A Guide To Proper Buddhist Funeral, “Koperasi Buddhisme Malaysia Berhad” (Malaysian Buddhist Co-operative Society Berhad) 1999
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