

What a Buddhist Should Do When a Person is Dying

by Gehse Michael's Teacher

In the spring of 1991, the director of an American hospital which often treats Buddhist patients requested advice on any special steps to be taken with followers of the Buddhist religion as they die.

Question:

How should family, friends, and hospital staff handle a Buddhist who is dying?

Answer:

As a person is dying, it is extremely important not to disturb or upset them in any way. Family, friends, and staff should not show any excitement near the deathbed, and should speak softly, in restrained tones. It is best at this time to speak as much as possible about religious topics, according to the religious faith followed by the dying person.

If the person is a Buddhist, the people present should try to talk about subjects such as the Buddhas, lamas or great religious teachers, compassion, loving kindness, the wish to achieve enlightenment for the good of all living beings, and especially the fact that the Buddha himself is a place where one can take ultimate refuge or shelter--a protection which will never fail.

The reason for trying to speak about these things is that the last moments of thought in this life are extremely important in determining what will happen to a person in the future: these thoughts trigger particular seeds in a person's mind that will decide where they are to go next. Therefore it is essential to see that these thoughts are as pure as possible. There should be no bad thoughts or disturbing emotions.

The process of dying is very similar to what happens when an advanced religious practitioner goes into meditation. The mind goes deeper and deeper, and enters an extremely subtle state. Because of this it moves into a psychic chamber that is located in the area of the heart and forms part of the central psychic channel that passes down through the center of the body.

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Although the person has stopped breathing and has to all outer appearances become completely cold and lifeless, this subtle state of mind is nonetheless still present in the body, within this chamber. In some people it may remain there for as long as ten days, although seven days is more typical. The way in which the person's mind is stirred out of this deep, subtle state is the crucial point in the death process.

If allowed to do so, the mind will of its own accord come out of the subtle state--and this is actual death. If however we touch or jar the body abruptly, we can waken their mind from its deep state. The mind will leave the body where we touch it: if we touch the lower part of the body, the legs or feet, then the mind will leave from there and in most cases lead the person to a birth in hell or one of the other lower realms. If we touch the upper part of the body it is better, for most people will then take a birth in the higher realms. The best place we can touch the person is at the center of the top of the head.

It should be emphasized though that one should avoid touching the person altogether. This is because stirring their mind out of its subtle state is actually taking it to the point of death—touching their body causes his mind finally to leave the body, and this is tantamount to killing them. Therefore we should be extremely careful to leave the person alone until the mind has completed the process of the subtle state and departed on its own accord.

Question:

How do we know when the mind has departed on its own? What signs will appear?

Answer: Once the deep, meditative state has been released, certain liquids will come out of the two nostrils of the person's nose, and also from his lower parts. This should not be confused with the passage of urine during the grosser stages of death; the liquids referred to here are known as the "red" and "white" substances, and are involved with the process of physical conception.

When the liquids are released, the person is actually dead, and his body can be touched. With some people the subtle state might go on considerably longer, and in such a case you can speak to the person quietly and calmly, and ask him two or three times to come out of it. Then the liquids will be released, and you can touch the body.

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Question: Is it all right after death to put the body into a refrigerated area?

Answer:

This is a very dangerous practice. If the mind is still in the subtle state, it will detect the cold and develop a strong desire for warmth. This can cause the person to take birth into one of the hot hells. It is better to wait at least 24 hours after death before refrigerating the body, and very preferable if the period can be even longer. If this is not possible, it is important to ask the person gently to release his state of meditation, as described above.

Question:

Is it appropriate for a Buddhist to have his bodily organs donated after death?

Answer:

It is a very good thing if one can make this final act of charity with their body. It should however be done out of a motivation of wanting to give, and not for any kind of monetary profit.

Question: What is the Buddhist position on mercy killing, or ending someone's life to prevent him further, incurable suffering?

Answer:

It is very wrong to turn off a life-support system, or to take any similar action, anything that will cause a being's life to end, even if they are "brain dead" but still breathing on a respirator, or the like.

Question: What is the Buddhist position on abortion?

Answer:

Abortion is completely wrong. It is murder. In fact it is a particularly repugnant form of murder, since in most cases of murder the victim is someone who can physically attempt to fight back and defend themselves, whereas in an abortion the victim is small and helpless, and cannot protect themselves.

Question: What is the Buddhist position on contraception?

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Answer:

Contraception is not killing, in types of contraception where conception has not occurred, but it is preventing a being from achieving a higher birth, a precious human life.

Question: Is there any way that we can help a person after he dies?

Answer:

In our lives we do a great many bad deeds, and they remain with us, like small black stones. We have also done a very few good deeds, either purposely or by sheer accident, and these are like small white stones. Nonetheless, by the force of our prayers, and by the blessings of the goodness of the "three gems" of Buddhism—that is, the Buddha, the high realizations of Buddhism, and people who have gained them—it is possible that at a very crucial point in the process of death, or during the "inbetween" period before the next life, the power of the white stone or few good deeds can be pulled out and triggered, rather than the power of the many black stones. It would be a little like winning the lottery.

Question: What particular prayers or rituals can be held to help the dead person?

Answer:

After the person dies, their mind enters a state called the "bardo" or inbetween state. During this period they are still seeking out his next birth. This "inbetween" being will never live for more than seven days, although they themselves can die and become an inbetween being again—for up to a total of seven times, or a total of 49 days, before the next birth is taken.

Because the inbetween state even in the longest case cannot last more than 49 days, we normally perform one ritual on the 49th day after the person's death (for all these prayers, we take the day of death as the first day counted). We believe that this ceremony, which is known as "jang-chok" or "ritual for the purification of bad deeds," can actually help the dead person to take a higher birth.

During this ceremony we lay out some pieces of the dead person's clothing. The "inbetween" being, or the person after his death and before their next birth, has a very subtle physical form, and during this "inbetween" period exhibits extranormal powers

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such as the ability to pass through walls. They are aware of outer physical events and can be present at the ceremony, attracted to his belongings.

Even though they may not understand the language in which the ritual is held, it is still effective for him. This is because the power of the ritual comes from what we call the "infallible three." The first of these is the blessing of the three jewels, mentioned above. The second is the power of emptiness, or the truth of the fact that nothing can exist inherently. The third is the pure and selfless intent to help the dead person, felt in the hearts of the people performing the ritual.

Incidentally, even if the dead person has already taken their rebirth by the time of the 49th day, the prayers will be effective in helping them in that rebirth. For this reason too it is a custom to hold an additional purification ceremony earlier, on the seventh day after death (again counting the day of death as the first day). Again the person's clothes are used, and the *jang-chok* is read, usually along with a set of nine prayers known as the *munlam de gu*, or any appropriate *munlam* type of prayer.

Question: Are there particularly effective prayers that can be read around the person as he actually dies?

Answer:

If the dying person has received the necessary initiations, it is very good if you can recite to them, calmly and clearly, the *dakkye* ritual used in the secret teaching of Vajra Yogini. The *tundruk* or secret six-session prayer is also very good. These rituals have a special power for the dying person because the prayers and visualizations have become ingrained in them, since he has recited and practiced these on a regular basis throughout their life. The prayers are effective whether or not they can at that point clearly hear or comprehend them.

Any other kind of *munlam* or prayer can be read around the dying person, if neither of the above is appropriate. It is also good if you can recite the *Om mani padme hung* prayer, which is familiar to nearly every Buddhist in our community.

Question: What kind of funeral ceremony is appropriate for a Buddhist?

Answer:

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There is no great difference whether the body is cremated or buried. There is a tradition not to burn the body in a case where the person has had a serious and contagious disease, since it is believed that the smoke from the cremation would be unhealthy for other beings; in this case, burial would be preferred. In general though the practice of burial uses up what would otherwise be useful land for the living. We also believe that there are certain spirits which we can't see, and which are able to partake of the body's flesh. Some of them are made ill by the flesh of a human, so that again cremation would be preferred.

Incidentally, in some countries it has become a tradition to hold parties or "wakes" including alcohol drinking, in connection with a funeral. Lord Buddha specifically prohibited the use of alcohol or drugs for Buddhists, and so Buddhists should avoid this practice.

Question: What should be done with the belongings of the dead person?

Answer: Of course, the wishes of the person as they expressed them before their death should be followed.