DEATH & DYING

INFORMATION FROM DIFFERENT ASIAN CULTURES & RELIGIONS

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INTRODUCTION

DYING AND DEATH PRACTICES

When dealing with culturally diverse communities there are many religious and cultural beliefs that need to be considered when caring for someone at the end of life. The primary source of information regarding the care of the individual or the person's body is the patient, close friends and their family. It is essential assumptions are not made and that in every case, the patient and family are consulted about these arrangements in advance, where possible.

Religious and cultural considerations for CALD Groups

- **Keep in mind that religious and cultural beliefs vary between individuals, even in close family groups**, and can impact on such issues as organ donation, resuscitation, handling of the body just before or after death and transfer to the mortuary or coroner.

- **Removal of the body to the mortuary**
  - Some families may object to autopsies and need to be informed of such procedures and the coroner's office needs to be contacted immediately if such objections are made.
- **Special religious cultural observances**
  - It is important to involve spiritual leaders such as Priests, Monks, and Imams – check with the client and/or family regarding special needs. Extended family members may expect to be present during the last hours for prayer or to perform certain tasks upon death.
- **Buddhism**
  - Families who adhere strictly to Buddhist beliefs value that the body be gently covered by a cotton sheet once the person has been pronounced dead. Care must be taken not to create any disturbance to the body. The body should not be disturbed or touched, eg, do not close the eyes, mouth, etc.
  - Some families may require the body to remain unmoved for eight hours following death, to allow the spirit to pass into the next world.
- **Hinduism**
  - When the deceased is wearing a ring, medal, necklace or thread, it is essential to ask a family member for advice regarding the removal of any such objects.
- **Sikhism**
  - The comb, wrist bangle, ceremonial sword and special shorts must not be removed from the deceased. Again it is essential to ask the family about the removal of any such objects.
- **Muslim**

- The daily ritual of prayer remains vitally important when a Muslim is dying, even though the seriously ill are technically exempt. Fellow Muslims helping to care for the dying also need to pray throughout the day: it is appreciated if hospitals can make a prayer mat or private prayer room available.

CAMBODIANS

DYING AND DEATH

For Cambodians in the West (and to some extent, those elsewhere), dying is often accompanied by more "baggage" than other people. Besides the usual physical, personal, interpersonal, and spiritual issues, there also may be issues alluded to above, such as survivor guilt, guilt over decisions made during the Holocaust, unresolved grief, lack of cultural support, lack of family support, and others. As with other persons going through the process, Cambodians may experience a wide range of emotions, but acceptance or resignation are the most commonly displayed (Keovilay, Rasbridge & Kemp, 2000)
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Most families prefer that discussion of end-of-life issues be with the family rather than the patient. There often are family attempts to "protect" the patient from knowledge of a poor prognosis. In some families there is an almost mystical faith in Western medicine and thus a reluctance to forgo even the most futile treatment. Withdrawal of treatment usually requires extended discussion with all family members and in many cases, repeated explanations.

Pain and other symptoms are often endured with stoicism. This is a critical issue in caring for Cambodians with advanced disease: One must ask very directly and specifically about each symptom that a Cambodian patient (especially older ones) may be experiencing. General or passing questions are meaningless. Equanimity in the face of death is highly valued. One should go into death calmly and mindfully.

Dying at home allows significantly greater cultural/community support than a hospital death. For example, in some locales, with support or intercession from hospice staff, the body may be kept at home for up to 24 hours. This allows for ceremonies and visitation that are very helpful to the family. In any case, hospice staff should assist in preventing the body being rushed out of the home as government agencies may desire.

Family expressions of grief after death may be open and unrestrained; or may be inhibited. We have noticed that persons in acute mourning often are extensively and even severely coined - as if to say, without words, "See my terrible pain."

Ideally, the body should be washed and prepared by the family. The hands are placed in a prayerful position and candles and incense placed in the hands. Some families place a coin in the mouth of the deceased. After the death, neighbours and friends visit in large numbers and are expected to make monetary contributions to the family for the funeral and related ceremonies. Donations are also given at the ceremony.

Cremation is preferred, though some Cambodians in America are buried. Ceremonies are usually held the weekend after the death and again at 100 days after the death. Offerings commemorating the deceased are also made at the New Year in April and at other times as well.

CHINESE

FUNERAL CUSTOMS & THE WAKE

The burial of the dead (cremation is traditionally uncommon) is a matter taken very seriously in Chinese societies. Improper funeral arrangements can wreak ill fortune and disaster upon the family of the deceased.

To a certain degree, Chinese funeral rites and burial customs are determined by the age of the deceased, the manner of his/her death, his/her status and position in society and his/her marital status.

According to Chinese custom, an older person should not show respect to a younger. Thus, if the deceased is a young bachelor his body cannot be brought home but is left in a funeral parlour. His parents cannot offer prayers for their son: being unmarried he has no children to perform these rites either (hence why the body does not come to the family home). If a baby or child dies no funeral rites are performed, as respect cannot be shown to a younger person: the child is buried in silence.

Funeral rites for an elderly person must follow the prescribed form and convey relevant respect: rites befitting the person's status, age etc. must be performed even if this means the family of the deceased must go into debt to pay for them.

Preparation for a funeral often begins before death has occurred: if a person is on his/her deathbed a coffin will often have already been ordered by the family. A traditional Chinese coffin is rectangular with three 'humps', but it more usual in modern times for a western style coffin to be used. The coffin is provided by an undertaker who oversees all the funeral rites.

When a death occurs in a family all statues of deities in the house are covered with red paper (so as not to be exposed to the body or coffin) and mirrors removed from sight, as it is believed that one who sees the reflection of a coffin in a mirror will shortly have a death in his/her family. A white cloth will be hung across the doorway of the house and a gong placed on the left of the entrance if the deceased is male and right if female.

Before being placed in the coffin, the corpse is cleaned with a damp towel, dusted with talcum powder and dressed in his/her best clothes from his/her own wardrobe (all other clothing of the deceased is burnt and not reused) before being placed on a mat (or hay if on a farm). The body is completely dressed- including footwear, and cosmetics if female- but it is not dressed in red clothes (as this will cause the corpse to become a ghost): white, black, brown or blue are the usual colours used. Before being placed in the coffin the corpse's face is covered with a yellow cloth and the body with a light blue one.

The Wake

The coffin is placed on its own stand either in the house (if the person has died at home) or in the courtyard outside the house (if the person has died away from home). The coffin is placed with the head of the deceased facing the inside of the house resting about a foot from the ground on two stools, and wreaths, gifts and a portrait or photograph of the deceased are placed at the head of the coffin. The coffin is not sealed during the wake. Food is placed in front of the coffin as an offering to the deceased. The deceased's comb will be broken into halves, one part placed in the coffin, one part retained by the family.

During the wake, the family do not wear jewellery or red clothing, red being the colour of happiness. Traditionally, children and grandchildren of the deceased did not cut their hair for forty-nine days after the date of death, but this custom is usually only observed now by the older generations of Chinese. It is customary for blood relatives and daughters-in-law to wail and cry during mourning as a sign of respect and loyalty to the deceased. Wailing is particularly loud if the deceased has left a large fortune.

At the wake, the family of the deceased gather around the coffin, positioned according to their order in the family. Special clothing is worn: children and daughters in law wear black (signifying that they grieve the most), grandchildren blue and great grandchildren light blue. Sons-in-law wear brighter colours such as white, as they are considered outsiders. The children and daughters-in-law also wear a hood of sackcloth over their heads. The eldest son sits at the left shoulder of his parent and the deceased's spouse at the right. Later-arriving relatives must crawl on their knees towards the coffin.

An altar, upon which burning incense and a lit white candle are placed, is placed at the foot of the coffin. Joss paper and prayer money (to provide the deceased with sufficient income in the afterlife) are burned continuously throughout the wake. Funeral guests are required to light incense for the deceased and to bow as a sign of respect to the family. There will also be a donation box, as money is always offered as a sign of respect to the family of the deceased: it will also help the family defray the costs of the funeral.

During the wake there will usually be seen a group of people gambling in the front courtyard of the deceased's house: the corpse has to be 'guarded' and gambling helps the guards stay awake during their vigil; it also helps to lessen the grief of the participants.

The length of the wake depends upon the financial resources of the family, but is at least a day to allow time for prayers to be offered. While the coffin is in the house (or compound) a monk will chant verses from Buddhist or Taoist scriptures at night. It is believed that the souls of the dead face many obstacles and even torments and torture (for the sins they have committed in life) before they are allowed to take their place in the afterlife: prayers, chanting and rituals offered by the monks help to smooth the passage of the deceased's soul into heaven. These prayers are accompanied by music played on the gong, flute and trumpet.

FUNERAL CEREMONIES, BURIAL, MOURNING AND THE RETURN OF THE DECEASED

Funeral ceremony and procession

When the prayer ceremonies are over the wailing of the mourners reaches a crescendo and the coffin is nailed shut (this sealing represents the separation of the dead from the living) and yellow and white 'holy' papers are pasted on the coffin to protect the body being disturbed by malign spirits. During the sealing of the coffin all present turn away from the coffin, as watching a coffin being sealed is considered very unlucky. The coffin is then carried (with the head of the deceased facing forward) from the house (being a pallbearer is considered to bestow the blessing of the deceased upon the bearer, thus there are usually many volunteers) using a piece of wood tied over the coffin.

The coffin is not carried directly to the cemetery but is first placed on the side of the road outside the house, where more prayers are offered and papers scattered. The coffin is placed

in a hearse which moves slowly for a mile (or more rarely, it is carried a mile), with the eldest son and family members following behind with their heads touching the hearse. If there are many relatives, a white piece of cloth links the hearse to family members behind. Order in the funeral procession follows the order of status in the family. A white piece of cloth is tied to vehicles accompanying the hearse, or a white piece of paper may be pasted on their windshields. The eldest son usually sits next to the coffin. A long, lit joss stick is held throughout the journey, symbolising the soul of the deceased, and is relit immediately if it goes out. Occasionally paper models of objects such as cars, statues ships etc. are carried with the procession symbolising the wealth of the deceased's family. If the procession needs to cross water, the deceased must be informed that the cortege is to cross it, as it is believed that if not informed, the soul of the dead will not be able to cross the water.

The Burial

Chinese cemeteries are generally located on hillsides as this is thought to improve the feng shui. The further up the hill the grave is, the better its situation is thought to be. When the procession arrives at the graveside it is taken down from the hearse and, again, all present turn away from the coffin, and also turn away when it is lowered into the grave. Family members and other relatives throw a handful of earth into the grave before it is filled. After the funeral, all clothes worn by the mourners will be burned in order to avoid the bad luck associated with death. After the coffin is buried, the keeper of the cemetery will also offer prayers for the deceased. Family members and relatives are presented with a red packet (a sign of gratitude from the deceased family, and the money contained in it must be spent) and a white towel, also as a sign of gratitude but also for funeral guests to wipe off perspiration.

The eldest son of the deceased will retrieve some earth from the grave to be placed in an incense holder, and the deceased will be worshipped by the family at home using an ancestral tablet.

Mourning

Although the funeral rites are now over, the period of mourning by the family continues for a hundred days. A piece of coloured cloth is worn on the sleeve of each of the family members for the hundred days to signify mourning: black by the deceased's children, blue by the grandchildren and green by the great-grandchildren. More traditional families will wear these cloths for up to 3 years. A period of mourning is not expected if children die, and a husband is not compelled to mourn the passing of his wife.

The Return of the Deceased

Chinese belief holds that seven days after the death of a family member the soul of the departed will return to his/her home. A red plaque with suitable inscription may be placed outside the house at this time to ensure the soul does not become lost.

On the day of the return of the soul, family members are expected to remain in their rooms. Flour or talcum powder may be dusted on the floor of the entrance hall of the home to detect the visit of the deceased.

INDIANS

HINDU DEATH RITUALS AND BELIEFS

There is one thing that is certain in this lifetime: eventually we all must die. A belief in the cyclical reincarnation of the soul is one of the foundations of the Hindu religion. Death is viewed as a natural aspect of life, and there are numerous epic tales, sacred scriptures, and Vedic guidance that describe the reason for death's existence, the rituals that should be performed surrounding it, and the many possible destinations of the soul after departure from its earthly existence. While the ultimate goal is to transcend the need to return to life on earth, all Hindus believe they will be reborn into a future that is based primarily on their past thoughts and actions.

The first mortal to meet his fate with Death was named Yama. This dubious honour makes him uniquely qualified to lead the way for others after death. The sacred scriptures of the Rig Veda, which call him King Yama, promise that all who have been good will receive "admission to Yama's paradise and the everlasting enjoyment of all the heavenly pleasures, include the restoration of a sick body, the maintaining of family relations and the highly desired apotheosis". Yama is aided by two killer guide dogs that are described as the "four-eyed keepers of the path, who watch over men." These "two dark messengers of Yama with flaring nostrils wander among men, thirsting for the breath of life". Yet, once they have secured their prey, they lead them back to their heavenly realm, where Yama directs them to their destiny.

Cremation is a ritual designed to do much more than dispose of the body; it is intended to release the soul from its earthly existence. "Hindus believe that cremation (compared to burial or outside disintegration) is most spiritually beneficial to the departed soul." This is based on the belief that the "astral body" will linger "as long as the physical body remains visible." If the body is not cremated, "the soul remains nearby for days or months". The only bodies that are not generally burned are unnamed babies and the lowliest of castes, who are returned to the earth.

The standard cremation ceremony begins with the ritual cleansing, dressing and adorning of the body. The body is then carried to the cremation ground as prayers are chanted to Yama, invoking his aid.

It is the chief mourner, usually the eldest son, who takes the twigs of holy kusha grass, flaming, from the Doms' (the untouchable caste who tend funeral pyres) eternal fire to the pyre upon which the dead has been laid. He circumambulates the pyre counterclockwise– for everything is backward at the time of death. As he walks round the pyre, his sacred thread, which usually hangs from the left shoulder, has been reversed to hang from the right. He lights the pyre. The dead, now, is an offering to Agni, the fire. Here, as in the most ancient Vedic times, the fire conveys the offering to heaven.

After the corpse is almost completely burned, the chief mourner performs the rite called kapälakriyä, the 'rite of the skull,' cracking the skull with a long bamboo stick, thus releasing the soul from entrapment in the body. After the cremation, the ashes are thrown into a river, ideally the Ganges river, and the mourners walk away without looking back.

The death ritual does not end with the elimination of the body. There is still the safety of the soul to look after. To ensure the passage during its voyage to the Otherworld, an eleven-day

ritual called shraddha is performed. It "consist(s) of daily offerings of rice balls, called pindas, which provide a symbolic, transitional body for the dead. During these days, the dead person makes the journey to the heavens, or the world of the ancestors, or the 'far shore.'" ?"On the twelfth day, the departed soul is said to reach its destination and be joined with its ancestors, a fact expressed symbolically by joining a small pinda to a much larger one" ?Without these rites, the soul may never find it way to Yama's realm.

Those who have been "meritorious," but have not quite attained liberation through Self-knowledge, are sent to a heavenly realm to await their fate. "There the Gandharvas (demigods of fertility) sing to them and the bevies of celestial nymphs dance for them." Since there is no need for punishment, "they go forth immediately on very high divine carriages. And when they get down from those carriages, they are born in the families of kings and other noble people." There they "maintain and protect their good conduct" and live out their days before they are reborn enjoying "the very best of pleasures".

The fate for those who have participated in less honourable thoughts or actions is far less pleasant. The Arthasastra, a Hindu textbook from the second century BCE, offers a detailed description of some of the more frightening realms. Yet before reaching these dangerous destinations, one must first endure a miserable journey. "The hard-hearted men of Yama, terrifying, foul-smelling, with hammers and maces in their hands" come to get the deceased, who tremble and begin to scream. Filled with terror and pain, the soul leaves the body. "Preceded by his vital wind, he takes on another body of the same form, a body born of his own karma in order for him to be tortured."

The evil man becomes born as an animal, among the worms, insects, moths, beasts of prey, mosquitoes, and so forth. There he is born in elephants, trees, and so forth, and in cows and horses, and in other wombs that are evil and painful. When he finally becomes a human, he is a despicable hunchback or dwarf, or he is born in the womb of a woman of some tribe of Untouchables. When there is none of his evil left, and he is filled with merit, then he starts climbing up to higher castes, Shudra, Vaishya, Kshatriya, and so forth, sometimes eventually reaching the stage of Brahmin or king of men. With so many unpleasant possibilities, it is easy to understand why reincarnation is not the only goal of every Hindu.

Those who lead a life of austerity, meditation and grace can look forward to the possibility of reaching Brahmaloka. This is the "highest among the heavenly planes" and the dwelling place of Brahma himself. "This is a place of intensely spiritual atmosphere, whose inhabitants live, free from disease, old age, and death, enjoying uninterrupted bliss in the companionship of the Deity." There is no need for them to return to earth because they have freed themselves "from all material desires." While they do experience a sense of individuality, they also experience a oneness with Brahma. This is the realm of immortality.

There is one other way to achieve liberation from samsara. This is to die within the city of Banaras, on the Ganges. "Death, which elsewhere is feared, here is welcomed as a long-expected guest." A city of many names, it was known in ancient time as Kashi, the city of light, and the Mahabharata refers to it as Varanasi. The funeral pyres, which are located on the river, burn nonstop. "Death, which elsewhere is polluting, is here holy and auspicious." People travel from around the country and the planet to spend their last days in Banaras because, "Death, the most natural, unavoidable, and certain of human realities, is here the sure gate to moksha, the rarest, most precious, most difficult to achieve of ?spiritual goals".

For those who are unable to die in Banaras, cremation on the banks of the Ganges or the spreading of the ashes in her waters is the next best thing. Referred to as the "River of Heaven" or the "goddess and mother," she is considered to be sacred from her source in the Himalayas, all the way to the sea in the Bay of Bengal. Her power to destroy sins is so great that, people say, "even a droplet of Ganges water carried one's way by the breeze will erase the sins of many lifetimes in an instant".

THE HINDU FAITH, MOURNING, BURIAL AT SEA AND CREMATION

It must be understood that while this information was furnished by reliable sources, there are many different opinions between those of Hindu faith, and any Hindu contemplating cremation or burial at sea must seek the advice of a trusted priest.
Hindu death rituals in all traditions follow a fairly uniform pattern drawn from the Vedas, with variations according to sect, region, caste and family tradition. Most rites are fulfilled by the family, all of whom participate, including the children, who need not be shielded from the death. Certain rites are traditionally performed by a priest but may also be performed by the family if no priest is available. Here is a simple outline of rites that can be performed by Hindus in any locality. Variations are noted and suggestions made for Hindus in Western countries.

1. As Death Approaches

Traditionally, a Hindu dies at home. Nowadays the dying are increasingly kept in hospitals, even when recovery is clearly not possible. Knowing the merits of dying at home among loved ones, Hindus bring the ill home. When death is imminent, kindred are notified. The person is placed in his room or in the entryway of the house, with the head facing east. A lamp is lit near his head and he is urged to concentrate on his mantra. Kindred keep vigil until the great departure, singing hymns, praying and reading scripture. If he cannot come home, this happens at the hospital, regardless of institutional objections.

2. The Moment of Death

If the dying person is unconscious at departure, a family member chants the mantra softly in the right ear. If none is known, "Aum Namo Narayana" or "Aum Nama Sivaya" is intoned. (This is also done for sudden-death victims, such as on a battlefield or in a car accident.) Holy ash or sandal paste is applied to the forehead, Vedic verses are chanted, and a few drops of milk, Ganga or other holy water are trickled into the mouth. After death, the body is laid in the home's entryway, with the head facing south, on a cot or the ground--reflecting a return to the lap of Mother Earth. The lamp is kept lit near the head and incense burned. A cloth is tied under the chin and over the top of the head. The thumbs are tied together, as are the big toes. In a hospital, the family has the death certificate signed immediately and transports the body home. Under no circumstances should the body be embalmed or organs removed for use by others. Religious pictures are turned to the wall, and in some traditions mirrors are covered. Relatives are beckoned to bid farewell and sing sacred songs at the side of the body.

3. The Homa Fire Ritual

If available, a special funeral priest is called. In a shelter built by the family, a fire ritual (homa) is performed to bless nine brass kumbhas (water pots) and one clay pot. Lacking the shelter, an appropriate fire is made in the home. The "chief mourner" leads the rites. He is the eldest son in the case of the father's death and the youngest son in the case of the mother's. In

some traditions, the eldest son serves for both, or the wife, son-in-law or nearest male relative.

4. Preparing the Body

The chief mourner now performs arati, passing an oil lamp over the remains, then offering flowers. The male (or female, depending on the gender of the deceased) relatives carry the body to the back porch, remove the clothes and drape it with a white cloth. (If there is no porch, the body can be sponge bathed and prepared where it is.) Each applies sesame oil to the head, and the body is bathed with water from the nine kumbhas, dressed, placed in a coffin (or on a palanquin) and carried to the homa shelter. The young children, holding small lighted sticks, encircle the body, singing hymns. The women then walk around the body and offer puffed rice into the mouth to nourish the deceased for the journey ahead. A widow will place her tali (wedding pendant) around her husband's neck, signifying her enduring tie to him. The coffin is then closed. If unable to bring the body home, the family arranges to clean and dress it at the mortuary rather than leave these duties to strangers. The ritual homa fire can be made at home or kindled at the crematorium.

5. Cremation

Only men go to the cremation site, led by the chief mourner. Two pots are carried: the clay kumbha and another containing burning embers from the homa. The body is carried three times counterclockwise around the pyre, then placed upon it. All circumambulating, and some arati, in the rites is counterclockwise. If a coffin is used, the cover is now removed. The men offer puffed rice as the women did earlier, cover the body with wood and offer incense and ghee. With the clay pot on his left shoulder, the chief mourner circles the pyre while holding a fire brand behind his back. At each turn around the pyre, a relative knocks a hole in the pot with a knife, letting water out, signifying life's leaving its vessel. At the end of three turns, the chief mourner drops the pot. Then, without turning to face the body, he lights the pyre and leaves the cremation grounds. The others follow. At a gas-fuelled crematorium, sacred wood and ghee are placed inside the coffin with the body. Where permitted, the body is carried around the chamber, and a small fire is lit in the coffin before it is consigned to the flames. The cremation switch then is engaged by the chief mourner.

6. Return Home; Ritual Impurity

Returning home, all bathe and share in cleaning the house. A lamp and water pot are set where the body lay in state. The water is changed daily, and pictures remain turned to the wall. The shrine room is closed, with white cloth draping all icons. During these days of ritual impurity, family and close relatives do not visit others' homes, though neighbours and relatives bring daily meals to relieve the burdens during mourning. Neither do they attend festivals and temples, visit swamis, nor take part in marriage arrangements. Some observe this period up to one year. For the death of friends, teachers or students, observances are optional. While mourning is never suppressed or denied, scriptures admonish against excessive lamentation and encourage joyous release. The departed soul is acutely conscious of emotional forces directed at him. Prolonged grieving can hold him in earthly consciousness, inhibiting full transition to the heaven worlds. In Hindu Bali, it is shameful to cry for the dead.

7. Bone-Gathering Ceremony

About 12 hours after cremation, family men return to collect the remains. Water is sprinkled on the ash; the remains are collected on a large tray. At crematoriums the family can arrange to personally gather the remains: ashes and small pieces of white bone called "flowers." In

crematoriums these are ground to dust, and arrangements must be made to preserve them. Ashes are carried or sent to India for deposition in the Ganges or placed them in an auspicious river or the ocean, along with garlands and flowers.

8. First Memorial

On the 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th day, relatives gather for a meal of the deceased's favourite foods. A portion is offered before his photo and later ceremonially left at an abandoned place, along with some lit camphor. Customs for this period are varied. Some offer pinda (rice balls) daily for nine days. Others combine all these offerings with the following sapindikarana rituals for a few days or one day of ceremonies.

9. 31st-Day Memorial

On the 31st day, a memorial service is held. In some traditions it is a repetition of the funeral rites. At home, all thoroughly clean the house. A priest purifies the home, and performs the sapindikarana, making one large pinda (representing the deceased) and three small, representing the father, grandfather and greatgrandfather. The large ball is cut in three pieces and joined with the small pindas to ritually unite the soul with the ancestors in the next world. The pindas are fed to the crows, to a cow or thrown in a river for the fish. Some perform this rite on the 11th day after cremation. Others perform it twice: on the 31st day or (11th, 15th, etc.) and after one year. Once the first sapindikarana is completed, the ritual impurity ends. Monthly repetition is also common for one year.

10. One-Year Memorial

At the yearly anniversary of the death (according to the moon calendar), a priest conducts the shraddha rites in the home, offering pinda to the ancestors. This ceremony is done yearly as long as the sons of the deceased are alive (or for a specified period). It is now common in India to observe shraddha for ancestors just prior to the yearly Navaratri festival. This time is also appropriate for cases where the day of death is unknown.

Hindu funeral rites can be simple or exceedingly complex. These ten steps, devotedly completed according to the customs, means, and ability of the family, will properly conclude one earthly sojourn of any Hindu soul.

Religions such as Hinduism offer our own immortal souls satisfying answers to questions of life and death. Their ancient mythic texts provide real reasons for our existence here on earth. They also demonstrate that death is something that can be prepared for instead of being feared. In addition, they offer the possibility of something to look forward to, so we need not dread our last days on this planet. A true hindu shall love death as he loves this life.

JAPANESE

JAPANESE BUDDHIST FUNERAL CUSTOMS

By: Billy Hammond

Japanese funeral customs vary widely from region to region, so a generic description is not possible. The religion of the deceased person's family also has a bearing on the final arrangements, as do other factors such as the age at which the person died, social status and the family's economic circumstances.

I have attended a number of Japanese Buddhist funerals over the years for both friends and relatives and the information here is based on these experiences. Some of the customs, such as the wake service, funeral service, bone collection, etc. are fairly standard throughout Japan(1) although the specific rituals used will, of course, vary with the religious sect officiating. Information on burials has not been included because the vast majority of Japanese funerals are cremations and details on sutras, religious implements, etc. have been kept to the minimum to allow for a more generalized presentation.

Washing of the Body

The body of the deceased is usually washed at the hospital and the orifices stuffed with gauze or cotton. In former times, the family would wash the body; however, it has become more common to leave this up to the hospital. The body is then dressed in a suit (in the case of a man) or a kimono (in the case of a woman). Some men may be dressed in formal kimono, however, this has become rather uncommon. A cosmetics specialist from the mortuary will also put make-up on the body as necessary. The body is then taken to the place where the wake service is to be held.

Choosing the Arrangements

As soon as the person dies, a representative from the mortuary will approach the person who will be in charge of the arrangements (usually the eldest son) to choose the day of the service(2), type of altar for the funeral, food for the guests who come to the wake service, presents for those who come to the wake and/or the funeral, type of casket and other items pertaining to the funeral. As you can imagine, the bigger and taller altars (the typical altar is tiered and decorated with elaborate carvings) cost more. These are assembled at the funeral site by the mortuary workers and usually flowers and fruits are placed on them.

Preparing the body

The body is put on dry ice(3) in a room at the mortuary or in front of the family altar (most Japanese are Buddhists) and the next of kin stay with it or close-by until it is time to put it in the casket. By this time all of the close relatives will have changed into black suits and black kimono or black dresses.

People from the mortuary arrive and place the body in the casket. After the body is placed in the casket, a traditional white kimono, leggings, sandals, paper money for the deceased to pay for the toll across the River of the 3 Hells, and a white headband with a triangle in the centre are put into the casket. Burnable items such as cigarettes, candy, etc. that the deceased was

fond of in life may also be placed in the casket. After the items have been placed in the casket, more dry ice is added.

The body is placed in front of the main altar if the wake and funeral are to be held at the mortuary hall or in front of the family altar if the wake is to be held at home.

Condolences

A table is set up at the entrance of the home or hall and 2 or 3 people greet the people who arrive to pay their respects. Each person signs his name in a registry book and presents condolence money (*koden*), which is contained in a special envelope that has a thin black and white ribbon wrapped around it. The amount given depends on the relation of the visitor to the deceased and/or the deceased's family. The amount within the envelope is written on its outside. The receptionist notes down the amount of condolence money next to the giver's name in the registry book and presents it to the family together with the money after the funeral.

Incense is burned in front of the altar or on a table in front of the casket, and friends and relatives who arrive stand in front of the table facing the casket or sit on a cushion in front of the altar, bow, ring the altar bell, and offer incense and prayers individually.

The visitor extends his condolences to the family members who are usually seated close to the deceased. After speaking to the family, the visitor goes to another room where drinks and food are served.

The Wake Service and the Wake

The Buddhist priest arrives at the scheduled time and is offered green tea. He speaks briefly with the family, during which time people who have not entered the room yet come in and sit on the floor (or on chairs if it is a funeral hall). After everyone has entered, the priest turns to the altar, bows, lights incense and begins to read a sutra. During the sutra reading, the priest gives a signal and the members of the family, who are seated in hierarchical order, rise and go to the incense urn, bow, offer incense, bow again and return to their seats. After the family members have finished, the visitors repeat the ritual until everyone has finished. The priest finishes the sutra, after which everyone bows to the altar and the wake service ends. Depending on the Buddhist sect, everyone may chant the "mantra" of the Buddhist sect in unison at points during the service.

Even after the wake service has ended, visitors will continue to arrive to pay their respects, and it is considered appropriate for friends, other than very close friends, to only attend either the wake service (or visit on the night of the wake service) or the funeral. A small present is given to each visitor as he or she leaves as an expression of thanks from the family.

The family stays up with the deceased in the same room for the night. In some areas, a person who is not a close blood relative (son-in-law, daughter-in-law of the deceased, distant cousin, etc.) may be asked to do this, while in others the next-of-kin take turns staying up with the deceased.

The Funeral
The funeral is usually held on the day after the wake service. The body is transferred to a temple (in the case where the wake was held at home) and placed before the altar that the mortuary has constructed in front of the temple altar. A wooden tablet inscribed with the posthumous name(4) of the deceased is placed on the altar or in front of it. The posthumous name is assigned and inscribed by the priest.

When the time for the funeral service arrives, the priest reads the sutra and partway through gives a signal to begin the offering of incense. Just as at the wake service, each of the family members offer incense in hierarchical order, after which the visitors take turns in offering incense. Almost all of the visitors have rosaries, which they drape over their hands. The person offering incense goes to the urn placed in front of the altar, stands at attention (or sits Japanese style on the cushion in front of it if the urn is on a low table on the floor), puts his or her hands together with the rosary around them, then bows. Next he or she places a pinch of incense on the smouldering incense in the urn after bringing it close to the forehead. Some people repeat this process 3 times; others do it only once. The person stands at attention again (or bows while sitting Japanese style if the urn is on a low table on the floor), and again bows before returning to his or her seat.

The priest finishes reading the sutra (he continues to chant while incense is being offered) and the people bow as he leaves the room. A representative of the family (usually the eldest son) thanks the visitors on behalf of the family after the priest leaves. Telegrams from friends and companies are then read by an emcee from the mortuary. Next, depending on the area, the visitors may be asked to put flowers in the casket during the final viewing. After the final viewing the casket is sealed.

Everyone stands at attention and the pallbearers carry the casket to the hearse. The hearse is elaborately carved and looks like a temple on wheels. The hearse leads the funeral procession to the crematorium with the car or cars with the immediate family members following.

The Crematorium
The casket is unloaded from the hearse at the crematorium and placed on a sliding tray connected to the oven. The family members watch the casket as it is slid into the crematorium and are told by the attendant at what time to return to get the remains. A key that will unlock the crematorium portal (most crematoriums handle more than one body at a time) that the body was slid through is sometimes given to a representative family member.

The family goes home or waits at the funeral home until the appointed time. In some areas, the route used to travel home is changed to prevent the deceased spirit from following the family home. At some funerals, the family has food and drink catered for the family members and close friends and it is partaken during this interim.

At the appointed time, the family members go to the crematorium and the burned body is slid back out. Each of the family members is given a set of chopsticks to pick up the bones to put into the urn. The attendant usually points out the important pieces to pick up to put into the urn, the most important being the Adam's apple. The family members pick up the bones and

put them into the urns with two persons grasping the same bone fragment together and putting it into the urn in unison. This custom explains why when two Japanese reach for the same piece of food at the same time with chopsticks, both will quickly pull back, as this is the only time two people hold the same thing with two sets of chopsticks.

When the urn (some Japanese will put a portion of the bones in a temple and some in the family grave, in which case 2 urns are filled) has been filled, it is covered and wrapped in a white cloth. The urn may be taken home and kept there until after the 49th day memorial service, depending on the custom prevalent in the area and the religion. In other areas the urn may be taken directly to the cemetery, and in rural areas there may even be a funeral procession to the cemetery with relatives and friends carrying the urn, the long wooden post or wooden strip bearing the posthumous name of the deceased, a picture of the deceased, ornaments used at the funeral, etc. There are large differences in ornaments, floral arrangements and the processions themselves that are dependent on local customs.

After Cremation

After cremation and bringing the urn home or putting it into the grave (Japanese family graves have a hollow space inside the gravestone to put the urns of the family), there are memorial services as well as prescribed times for gravesite visitation that vary with the Buddhist sect and local customs. Some areas have a service every day for the first 7 days, others have them at varying frequency up until the 49th day service. After the 49th day service, the 1st year Obon (Festival of the Dead) service is often considered important and memorial services are held at the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, 13th-years and in other years depending on the sect and the desires of the survivors up to the 50th year.

Notes

(1) Funeral customs on Okinawa are different from those of the rest of Japan.
(2) Japanese do not usually have funerals on inauspicious days known as " *tomobiki* ".
(3) The Japanese do not have the custom of embalming the body.
(4) The posthumous name is called *kaimyo* in Japanese and it is a name that differs from that which the person had when alive, which is supposed to help prevent the person from returning every time his or her name is called.

VIETNAMESE

DEATH RITUALS IN VIETNAMESE SOCIETY

Dieu-Hien T. Hoang, RN, December 2000

Pha.m Co^n So*n, (1996) a Vietnamese anthropologist, said, "Death is not the end but is the final stage of one life to be transformed into another." He also asserted that death rituals provide the bereaved with a chance to fulfil their filial obligations to the deceased. Because death is usually unexpected, it often leaves family members and friends with unfinished business with the deceased. Since filial responsibilities are weighed heavily in the Vietnamese culture, and proper death rituals according to one's abilities are important, death rituals give the bereaved a final chance to make it right by the deceased and thus provide a sense of continuity as well as final closure.

Although many death rituals are burdened with rules and can be costly, the long-term effects they may have on participants are far from ethereal. The following anecdote detailing the death rituals of a Vietnamese family demonstrates that such rituals can have a therapeutic effect on the dying and bereaved. The details of this example should not be used as representative of all funerary rituals in Vietnam. Variations within the Vietnamese culture occur between regions, religious affiliations, ethnic backgrounds, etc. However, one common principle exists across subgroups: there is intensive and extensive family and community involvement throughout the whole process with the immediate family being gradually weaned off the support of family and friends over a period of 2 to 3 years.

In 1994, my uncle was diagnosed with liver cancer that had spread all over his abdomen. After absorbing the nature of uncle's prognosis, the family took him home. In the last week, uncle's condition worsened. Death looked imminent and the family took turns so that someone was at uncle's bedside at all times. My cousins sent word to all those who were special to uncle to come and say goodbye. All uncle's grandchildren, ages eighteen months to eleven years, were brought home to see him and remained there.

Close friends and relatives came and went frequently during this last week. Each used their talent to "serve" uncle. Since I am a nurse, I searched all over town for some morphine to relieve his pain. A cousin who is a doctor came daily to take uncle's blood pressure and give medical advice. An aunt cooked him his favourite dishes while knowing that he might not eat much. Grandchildren showed him how well they did in school. The youngest ones showed him the newest "tricks" that they had learned.

We spent very brief moments with uncle, mindful of his diminishing strength. We spent most of the time with each other. Later, we would reminisce about the events of uncle's last week and what each surviving family member was able to do for him.

When uncle took his last breath, the crying began gradually as reality started to sink in. All manners of grief were shown; from stoic solemnity to weeping, crying, sobbing and screaming. The only thing not acceptable would have been laughing. All the grandchildren were present and they all cried, even the eighteen month old baby.

After a time, the children were taken away. The family bathed uncle's body and dressed him in his best outfit. Much love and care was put into making him look presentable. This provided another chance for us to say goodbye.

Uncle was left lying in state at home for several hours to wait for an auspicious time and for the other close friends and relatives to arrive. The family took turns keeping a vigil over the body at all times. An altar was set with a photograph, candles, and incense. Relatives and friends who came to pay their respects stood in front of the altar, burned incense, and quietly said a prayer for uncle or said goodbye, or had whatever private conversation they wished to have with uncle at that moment.

Before uncle was moved into the coffin, a prayer service was held. Before closing the lid of the coffin, the family had another opportunity to see uncle for the last time. Another outpouring of grief occurred since uncle would now be separated from us by a box.

The coffin remained in the family home for three days, and relatives, in-laws, neighbours, and colleagues of my aunt, uncle, and cousins came and paid their respects. Money, flowers, and wreaths were donated according to the guest's ability and closeness to the family. Food and drinks were served to all as they came. Most stayed at least long enough to say their condolences and chat. Close friends and relatives spent hours or days with the family, helping to cook, organize, direct the flow of visitors, or just chat about good and bad times, about uncle, and about each other. There were tearful moments and also occasional laughter. A family member kept vigil over the coffin at all times.

Removing the coffin from the home was another emotional peak in the ebb and flow of grief. Uncle would be leaving home for the last time. A prayer service was held before we moved the coffin. When this concluded, family and relatives cried and called out for uncle again, saying goodbye yet again.

At the gravesite, another service was held. The coffin was lowered into the grave and buried. Emotions, which had calmed during the service, rose again. Here was yet another chance for mourners to say goodbye, and another outpouring of grief occurred. Most guests left shortly after the burial to return to uncle's home for the feast.

The closest friends and relatives remained with the family for a quiet time of prayer and contemplation. Just before leaving the gravesite, the family again became very emotional. My aunt, cousins, and the older grandchildren sobbed bitterly and were reluctant to leave the gravesite. This would be the first time since uncle was dying that they left his side. They all said goodbye for the last time.

Before leaving the cemetery, they burned incense and paid their respects at the graves nearby: all our great-grandparents', grandparents', aunts', uncles' and cousins'. As they went from grave to grave, they felt more at peace with the thought that uncle would be in good company, so to speak.

Back at home, a feast prepared by relatives and neighbours was served. The whole community; family, relatives, friends and neighbours, got together and renewed ties. From the moment of imminent death until the end of the funeral, key relatives and friends stayed at the home and helped organize everything; from cooking and preparing garb to making arrangements. My aunt was consulted on important decisions.

By the time the funeral was over, family members were physically and emotionally spent. But they had ample opportunities to grieve privately during the vigil and publicly with other loved ones. Now they were all "grieved out." They needed some time to themselves.

Three days after the funeral, the support and intense grieving that they needed returned. The closest relatives and family went back to the cemetery to bring flowers and incense to the gravesite, say more prayers, and clean up the site. We wept and cried and talked to uncle in private.

Then, for the next 49 days, the family held a memorial service every seven days. Again, they shared meals with close friends and relatives and reminisced about events of uncle's passing as well as everything else in their lives. The next gathering occurred 51 days later, on the 100th day after death, then 265 days later, on the first anniversary of the death; and finally a whole year later. Each memorial forced the family to burden others with their sorrow" so that they could grieve fully. Each successive memorial was held a little less frequently as the family became more able to resume some form of ordinary routine. After the first year, there was the first annual anniversary of the death.

At home, incense was burned on the altar every day to remember and respect uncle. In the first hundred days after the death, food was presented on the altar before each meal. After that, on every special occasion, the ritual of sharing food is repeated: the family invites uncle to enjoy the food that they eat to show he is still a part of their lives.

These are the usual rituals used to honour the dead ancestors. The frequency of the rituals in the first 100 days forced the family to think of and treat uncle as a dead ancestor. It reminded the family that the transition of uncle from being among us to residing with dead ancestors was complete. It reinforced a new social order and also provided opportunities for more private grieving, since inevitably, when offering food to uncle's spirit, the family remembered what he liked or did not like while living. There were often conversations with uncle, who was symbolized by his photograph on the altar, on these occasions.

After the funeral, family members wore a small piece of black or white fabric on their clothes everyday to signify that they were in mourning. They wore this for two years. At every memorial service, my aunt, cousins, and their children wore the mourning clothes that they wore at the funeral. On the second anniversary, these clothes would be burned to signify that the mourning period was over.

During the mourning period, the bereaved, depending on their relationship to the deceased, are prohibited from marrying or wearing brightly coloured clothing. The length of the mourning period depends on the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved.

Generally, it is two years for immediate family members. When this formal mourning period is over, it is permissible for the bereaved to plan major life changes such as marriage. The deceased's memory is not erased and the family still observes the anniversary of the death each year. But life goes on. The transition period for the bereaved has ended. The burning of mourning clothes signifies the incorporation of the bereaved into the normal course of life.

The socially prescribed rituals from the time of death until the end of the mourning period are designed to provide a structure for the grief process. To the bereaved, the image of the deceased as part of this world is still fresh in their minds and recedes itself into another world only gradually. In the first three to five days after death, before the funeral takes place, the bereaved grieve in waves; at times deeply and intensely, with quiet moments to work through their feelings in private and to reconnect and receive social support from family, friends, and the community. Each successive wave of deep public grieving takes the deceased a little farther away from the living; from lying as if a asleep on a cot among family, to being put away in a closed coffin- a symbol of the deceased, to being buried under ground, separated from the family by layers of dirt, and finally, being left behind in the graveyard among the dead. The last stage, leaving the deceased in company of the ancestors, creates a sense of continuity, a feeling that the deceased is actually going somewhere to be among other loved ones.

For Vietnamese, arranging a proper funeral for a loved one is one of the most filial things a person can do (So*n, 1996). In reality, a culturally proper funeral is more than an empty gesture to the dead, it helps the living to grieve and go on with life. The elaborate details of death rituals require extensive and intensive involvement of the family social network and the whole community. These rituals communicate the social values of communal responsibilities.

However one may choose to interpret death rituals, they constitute a dramatization of a worldly event, death, in the presence of and in reference to the sacred. They formalize a naturally occurring transition from life to death, providing a structure which facilitates the adaptation of the bereaved, whether this means accepting the permanent departure of a loved one from this life, or restoring the balance upset by the death. In a concrete sense, death rituals can also recreate social order by communicating, through the rules of who does what in the rituals, who is now to take the place of the deceased. Death rituals also serve as tools for humankind to transform death from a defeat of life to a stepping stone to another, perhaps better, place, and thus create a continuity beyond death itself. Finally, death rituals give the bereaved one last opportunity to make amends and say "I love you" and "goodbye."

ATTITUDES TOWARDS SUFFERING

Many see suffering and illness as an unavoidable part of life. Some also feel (the H'mong in particular) that the length of one's life is predetermined, and life prolonging or saving care is futile. Also within the community, stoicism is a highly respected personal trait which can prevent people from seeking care.

Aetiology of Illness: Illness may be attributed to organic or physical problems, an imbalance of yin and yang, an obstruction of chi (or life energy), a failure to be in harmony with nature,

punishment for immoral behaviour (in this or past lives), or a curse placed by an offended spirit. Most Vietnamese believe in organic causes of illness unless there is an obvious upset of supernatural forces, while most H'mong believe minor illness is organic but serious illness is supernaturally caused. Though immigrants may wish to use a shaman or spiritual healer, they can be expensive. Also, they are not easy to find in the US, and since many specialize in different types of disorders, one may not be able to find the right healer for their malady.

Distrust of Western Medicine: Many seek western health care only after more traditional methods fail. Also, many know people who have used western care and died anyway. Rural people have had less exposure to western medicine and distrust it more than those who were urban dwellers prior to arriving in the US. Many think physicians should be able to diagnose a problem in the first visit by looking at the patient and feeling their pulse. They do not understand the concept of using further techniques for diagnosis. They may think procedures are meant to cure or alleviate pain, and feel frustrated when, for example, they still cough after the X-ray. If they feel the procedure is ineffective, they may not seek further care or return for follow up.

Resistance to invasive procedures: Many believe that surgery upsets the soul or can actually cause one's spirit to leave the body. Some think injections may hurt the spirit, and therefore be hesitant to receive immunizations. Resistance to venepuncture is common for fear of upsetting the hot/cold balance. Also, during the war, peasants thought that when military doctors drew their blood, it was being given to the US troops to strengthen them. Many less educated people do not realize that the body can make more blood, and believe venepuncture will weaken them.

Beliefs about Asian physiology: Many Vietnamese believe that Asian people have a very different physiologic constitution than white people. Western medicines are thought of as "hot" and too potent for SE Asian physiology. Therefore, western drugs, doses, and interventions may not be seen as appropriate for Asian bodies. Thus, Vietnamese may not take medicines as prescribed, may shorten the duration or decrease the dosage. If symptoms resolve or no effect is seen, patients may discontinue medication.

Poor physician-patient communication: Southeast Asian cultures value politeness, respect for authority, and avoidance of shame. Because of this, many will not ask questions, will not voice disagreement or concern, and will not reveal intentions or actions that seem in contrast to the physicians wishes. If patients disagree or do not understand, they may simply listen and answer yes in respect, then not return for further care or comply with recommendations.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

In Vietnam there are many religions and this diversity extends to the US. Confucianism underlies many Vietnamese traditions shared by people of various religions.

Buddhism

This was the predominant religion in Vietnam, practiced by an estimated 90% of the population prior to the war. In Seattle, the majority of Vietnamese are Buddhist. There are

two main forms in Vietnam. The southern Hinayana believe only monks and nuns can achieve enlightenment, while the northern Mahayana believe laymen can attain enlightenment as well.

Confucianism
More a code of behaviour than a religion, it emphasizes filial piety and obligation, altruism and the belief that man creates his own destiny. Music, respect for authority (including teachers), and social rites are very important.

Taoism
Founded by a Chinese philosopher, Lao-tzu, this religion teaches that the goal of becoming an Ultimate and Unconditioned being can be achieved through thrift, humility and compassion. Taoists may worship many gods, and value simplicity, patience, and contentment. They avoid confrontation and strive for harmony both between men and between man and nature. Some Taoist groups also worship deities or other religions. They have an organized clergy and temples. Though many Vietnamese do not practice this religion, Taoism has strongly influenced Vietnamese culture.

Catholicism
Introduced in late sixteenth century by Portuguese, Spanish and French, Catholics in Vietnam have intermittently suffered persecution. Before the collapse of South Vietnam, an estimated 2 million people (of a population of 17 million) practiced Catholicism. This is the religion of many first wave refugees.

Other Beliefs/Sects
Many Vietnamese practice animism (worship of spirits and natural forces), ancestor worship, astrology, and are very superstitious. Older refugees in the US continue these practices and beliefs, while many younger people in the community do not. Cao Dai and Hoa Hoa are both sects with little influence.

The Celebration of Tet
Tet is the Vietnamese New Year, celebrated on the first day of the first month on the lunar calendar, usually between January 19 and February 20. It symbolized new beginnings, with various rituals added by different religions. In Vietnam, Tet was a time to pay debts, forgive others, improve self, and make friends out of adversaries. The celebration lasted three days, beginning at home. The first day was to be with family and pay respect to one's ancestors. The second day was in honour of teachers, and the third day was to visit friends. Most families saved throughout the year for Tet, houses were cleaned, decorated, and even repainted. Large expense was put into the celebration to ensure that the new beginning was a positive one. Buddhists in rural areas would erect bamboo poles and drape amulets from them to repel evil spirits.

The celebration of Tet has continued in the US. Older Vietnamese think of Tet very traditionally, while many younger Vietnamese think of Tet as a time for food, friends and parties.

RELIGIONS & DEATH

BUDDHISM

Buddhists believe that the dead are reborn at higher or lower planes of existence, depending on merits they have built up in this life and former lives.

A Vietnamese family meets with the monks at Khuong Viet Buddhist temple in Lørenskog. The atmosphere is serious, but not depressing. Together, they will try helping the soul of a recently deceased relative to gain clarity and peace in the spirit world, so that it can find its way to a rebirth in this world.

A large photograph of the dead person is displayed at a memorial altar beside the Buddha figure near the entrance to the temples ritual area. Flowers, candles and incense are all placed at the altar, together with offerings of fruit, cookies, soup and rice.

The temples spiritual leader recites from holy texts - *sutras* - that can help the dead. Other monks play wood blocks, bells, gongs and drums. The relatives of the dead person pray in front of where the photograph is displayed.

Ringing of a large bell further inside of the temple helps to summon the spirit of the deceased. The spirit then receives assistance from the living through instructions on how to orient itself in the spirit world. The ritual must be done so early after death as possible to hinder that the spirit becomes confused in its new existence, and loses its ability to find its way.

Buddhists believe that the dead are reborn at higher or lower planes of existence, depending on merits they have built up in this life and former lives. To enter death in a positive state of mind in the company of monks and family members can contribute to rebirth on a higher level.

In Buddhist philosophy, the word 'samsara' refers to a state where nothing remains the same - everything is either developing or decaying. Samsara has three aspects for Buddhists: suffering, change and the lack of an eternal self. This aspect of change throughout all of ones life helps people to accept that there is no eternal 'essence' in us, and the processes of change continue also after our physical death.

When a human understands samsara completely, it is as if a flame has been extinguished. One has achieved *nirvana*. This is the goal of all Buddhists. By achieving *nirvana*, a cycle is broken, and the spirit is not reborn again after death.

Buddhism has no dogmatic rules for what kind of care the body of the dead person should be given, aside that the process should be handled in a worthy and respectful way. The deceased may be cremated or buried, depending on the wishes of the family. White clothing and white headbands are symbols of mourning during the ceremony

HINDUISM

Hindus believe that humans are born again and again according to their *karma*, until they finally gain respite.

Hindus believe that humans are born again and again according to their *karma*, until they finally gain respite - moksha. By living a life of value without sin, it is possible to come closer to moksha, and perhaps be reborn in a higher form in the next life. To drink or bathe in water from the holy river Ganges contributes to rinsing oneself from sin.

When death approaches, the sick person will be lifted out of their bed and laid on the floor with their head towards the north. Relatives gather around the dying person, dip a leaf of sweet basil in water from the Ganges or milk, and place this on the lips of the dying person while they sing holy songs and read holy texts. To enter death with all of ones senses alive is considered ideal, and many Hindus will refrain from taking medication when they feel that their time is up.

After death, the dead person is ritually washed by family members, and wrapped in white cloth on the floor, but with the face uncovered. To die on the ground shows respect for the earth which humans have come from, and shall also help the soul to free itself from the body after death.

The dead person is washed at home, anointed with salve of sandalwood, *kum kum* powder and *vibuthi*, and clothed in white. The body is laid in a coffin and covered with flowers before it is driven to the crematorium. In north Indian tradition, three bowls of barley flour are now prepared. The first bowl is placed on the head of the deceased before being carried into the crematorium. The second is placed on the chest during the procession from the hearse. The third is placed on the stomach after arriving in the crematorium. In the crematorium, a small candle or oil lamp (*diwali* lamp) is lit, which the main mourner holds in his hand while carrying a container of water on his shoulder. He circles the dead person three times, and a hole is made in the container each time he goes around.

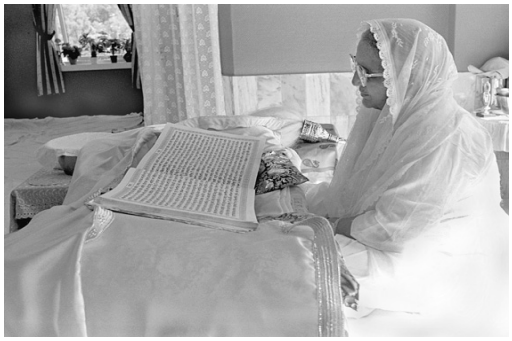
The coffin is then moved to the cremation room. The main mourner lights a candle on top of the coffin, which symbolically lights the cremation oven. After cremation, the ashes are sent in an urn to India for spreading in the holy river Ganges.

The death ritual lasts 12 days. During this period, the mourners are ritually unclean. They do not go to the temple, and must cover all religious pictures and figures that they have in the house. Family members sleep on the floor, and eat only vegetarian food. Every morning for 11 days, the eldest son - as main mourner - receives tutelage in the ritual from the priest. On the twelfth day, possessions of the eldest son are given to charity.

Each month during the first year after the death, a *pinda* rice-ball and bowl of water are offered in memory of the dead person. A widow will erase her marriage mark (*sindoor*) and clothe herself in white the first year after her husband's death. Sons will hold a memorial service each year on the day of their father's death as long as they are alive.

SIKHISM

By living a life according to Gods plan can humans end the cycle of rebirth already in this life.



Sikhs believe in reincarnation after death - as do Hindus and Buddhists. However, Sikhs believe that by living a life according to Gods plan, humans can end the cycle of rebirth already in this life.

When death approaches, friends and relations are called in to be together with the dying person, and recite from the holy book *Guru Granth Sahib*. Death should not be a sorrowful occasion. It is "forbidden" to cry:

> *Death of which men are afraid, gives me nothing but joy!*
> *It is through the gate of Death that one may unite with the Lord of Bliss.*
> (Saloka from *Guru Granth Sahib* p. 1365)

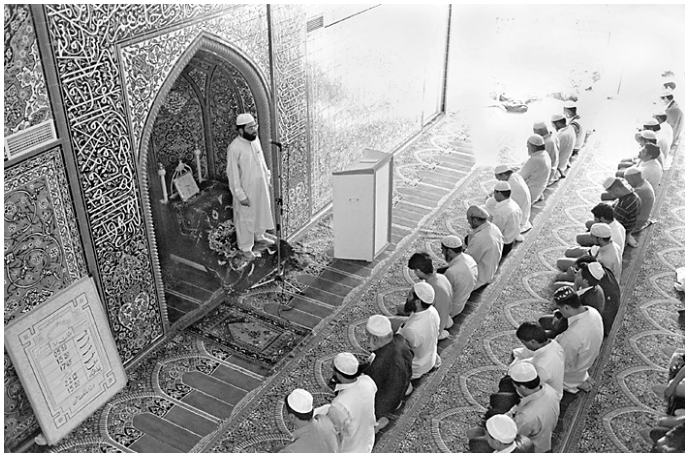
In a dead Sikh will be washed at home or at the hospital, clothed in clean clothes and placed in a coffin ornamented with flowers and wreaths. If the deceased has fulfilled the baptismal ritual Amrit¸ five symbols of Sikh membership will also be included in the casket: *Kesh* (unclipped hair), *Karra* (iron bracelet), *kachera* (a special type of undergarment), *kirpan* (sword) and *kangha* (comb). Friends and relatives drive in procession to the crematorium. The cover is removed from the casket in order to give everyone a last view of the deceased. The dead person is carried into the crematory chapel, where the poem Sohila is recited. A male relative then follows the dead person into the cremation room in order to turn the switch that lights the cremation oven. The ashes are later collected for spreading in running water – the family normally sends the ashes to India.

The mourners assemble after the cremation at either the gurdwara temple or privately for recitation of the poems *Ramkali Sad, Anand Sahib* and *Ardas*, as well as the distribution of *parsad*, a kind of bread/pudding which is a symbol of Gods blessing.

For ten days after the death, *Guru Granth Sahib* will be read or sung regularly in order to ease the sorrows of the family. The soul of the dead person needs no further assistance, though, as it is already together with God.

ISLAM

When death approaches, a Muslim will recite Islam's most important sentence: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger".



According to Islamic tradition, a dead person should preferably be buried within 24 hours. A dead man is washed by a male relative or an Imam. A dead woman is washed by a female relative or a midwife. The body is laid out with the arms along the side, and swaddled in white linen.

Before burial, the burial prayer must be recited. In Islamic countries, there are special places that are reserved for this purpose. Elsewhere the coffin may be driven to a mosque in a hearse. The prayer takes only a few minutes, and the coffin is transported further to either the cemetery or the airport for transport to the deceased country of origin.

On the day of resurrection, all good souls are awakened directly from their graves to live eternal life. This is why Muslims are against cremation. The body is buried lying on its right side and with the face turned toward Mecca. Usually, all those who participate in the ceremony will cast three hands full of earth on the grave while they recite: "Of this (i.e. the earth) We created you, and to it shall We cause you to return, and of it We shall cause you to be resurrected a second time."

According to Islamic beliefs, two of Gods angels come to the grave site immediately after the funeral ceremony is finished in order to inquire whether the deceased has lived a good life without sin. During the "interrogation", the angels will ask about what the dead person knows about God and the Prophet. Prayers from the living who are present at this moment are considered to be able to help the dead person.

Islamic tradition in general prefers graves to be simple, without fancy decoration. The graves of many Muslims are therefore either unmarked, or marked only with a wreath or bush. However, about half of the graves in Islamic cemeteries in Oslo are marked with a gravestone. There is a tendency that more and more family members choose to erect grave monuments in order to have memorials of their loved ones to visit.

Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe,
the Mercy giving, the Merciful!
Ruler on the Day for Repayment!
You do we worship and You do we call on for help.
Guide us along the Straight Road,
the road of those whom You have favoured,
with whom You are not angry,
or who are lost!
(Opening prayer from the Koran)

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