

Buddhist Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Buddhist Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Buddhism and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on regional distinctions, family traditions, individual religious beliefs, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are involved in Buddhist death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is highly personal and individualistic within Buddhism, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult the leader of a local monastery, a monastic community, or religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for Buddhists experiencing loss. A religious professional or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help Buddhists prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Buddhism and Beliefs Surrounding Death

Core Buddhist beliefs are centered around the idea of saṃsāra, which is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Buddhists believe that every being has lived thousands of different lives in different bodies and realms and is reborn again and again. The kind of life someone will be reborn into is determined by the karmic merit accrued in one's previous life. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to break the cycle of saṃsāra so that the soul will be liberated and achieve nirvana. Nearing death, a person may wish to meditate on their own life and share hopes for their next life.

The different realms that someone can be born into are:

- God's Realm (Deva)
- Human Realm (Manusya)
- Demi-God Realm (Asura)
- Animal Realm (Tiryagyon)
- Hungry Ghosts Realm (Preta)
- Hellish Realm (Naraka)

**Visual depiction of the six realms on page below

Buddhism teaches that death is not merely an end, but a transition. Beliefs about death emphasize the importance of caring for all beings and reminds Buddhists to act with kindness and compassion in order to prepare for death. Acceptance of the impermanent nature of life is meant to help Buddhists have a peaceful transition from one life to the next.

Resources For Buddhist Theology on Death:

- <https://www.urbandharma.org/udharma5/viewdeath.html>
- <https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhism/wheel-of-life-bhavacakra/>
- <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/philosophy-facpubs/7/>

The Wheel of Life



Preparing For Death

Because death is such an important aspect of Buddhism, many Buddhists practice preparing for death their entire lives. They know that it is part of the natural cycle of existence and often practice accepting the reality of death long before it becomes apparent. While Buddhists may have a more accepting attitude towards death, they may still struggle with feelings of sorrow, regret, and fear. It is important that family, friends, and caretakers support them in whatever ways they need and do their best to make the transition peaceful.

Ideally, the environment of a Buddhist preparing for death should be calm and tranquil. They may wish for only close friends, family, and spiritual leaders to be present. It is generally a time of deep meditation for Buddhists as they reflect on the life they have lived, and caretakers should do their best to remain present and supportive. They may wish to talk to a member of their monastic community or they might prefer privacy. They may also wish to study Buddhist scripture and recite certain sutras and mantras. Regardless of their particular desires around the end of life, it is important to listen and support the person as they undergo the transition.

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Buddhist and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- <https://www.poppysfunerals.co.uk/blog/a-buddhist-approach-to-death-dying-and-funerals/>
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/faqs/buddhism>
- <https://www.thebuddhistsociety.org/>

Caring for the Body

Following the Death

In Buddhist tradition, it is usually the responsibility of the family to care for the body after death. If this is not possible, a funeral director can be contacted to help with preparations of the body. After the moment of death, it is important that the body remains untouched for at least four hours. Buddhists believe that the soul does not immediately leave the body upon death, and that interacting with the body prematurely can disrupt the process of transition. After the four hour period, the body may be cleansed by the monastic community or family. After washing the body, it should be dressed in regular, everyday clothes. It is important that the clothes are not overly formal or decorative. Efforts should be made to keep the body cold until the funeral. If the deceased or family wishes for the body to be embalmed, this can be done in a funeral home and arranged through a funeral director. If the body is not going to a funeral home to be embalmed, it is typical that it will remain in the family home until the funeral. For more information about how to care for the body in a private residence consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Buddhist Cremations

Cremation is the typical choice for Buddhists due to the fact that Buddhism believes that the body is merely a vessel for the soul, and has little significance after death. It is also believed that cremation helps free the soul from the body. Usually, the family will honor the deceased by scattering their ashes in a moving body of water like a local river or stream. While cremation is the historic Buddhist tradition, burial is also an acceptable option. Some Buddhists prefer to be buried especially in a way that allows for natural decomposition of the body.

Environmentally Friendly Funeral Practices and Green Burials

Because Buddhism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings, green burials or environmentally friendly burials can be good options. In a natural or eco-friendly burial, the body is buried with minimal materials to facilitate natural decomposition. Wrapping the body in cloth or using a casket made of easily

decomposing materials are ways to have an eco-friendly burial. In order to legally have a natural or green burial, the body can not be embalmed. For more information on how to hold Buddhist funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on “green burials”. Green burial practices compliment Buddhist ideas about the natural cycle of life and can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

Resources on Body Care, Cremation, and Burials:

- <https://coastalfuneralcenter.com/understanding-buddhist-funeral-traditions/>
- https://www.upaya.org/dox/body_death.pdf
- <https://ethnomed.org/resource/death-in-cambodian-buddhist-culture/>
- Green Burials
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>

Buddhist Funerals

There are no specific requirements for how Buddhist funerals should be held. There is a great deal of flexibility and diversity in Buddhist death rituals in order to allow the family to decide what kind of funeral best suits their needs. They are usually simple and respectful, but the specific rituals can be chosen to reflect the needs of the family and circumstances.

Funeral Arrangements and Attire

Buddhist funerals are held either in a monastery or in a family home. It is typical that a monk or monastic community will lead the funeral proceedings by reciting a series of sutras and chants. The body will usually be present at the funeral in a simple, open casket. Funeral guests and mourners will be invited to place offerings around the body such as flowers, fruit, candles, and incense. A picture of the Buddha will be placed near the deceased. If the funeral is being held at home and led by a family member, there are a variety of rituals that can be done to honor the deceased. Some options include:

- Creating an altar to be decorated by funeral guests
- Placing an image of the deceased person and Buddha nearby the casket
- Lighting candles and burning incense
- Pouring water into an overflowing cup to symbolize having an open mind
- Chanting or singing sutras and mantras (the metta and heart sutras are popular choices at funerals)
- Offering gifts to the altar of the deceased like flowers, candles and fruits
- Ringing gongs or bells

If you want to send flowers, it is a good idea to ask the family about their preferences. Some Buddhist families prefer donations to charities in lieu of flowers while others appreciate the gesture and will display them at the funeral. When sending flowers, modest and simple arrangements are best.

After the funeral has ended, the casket will be sealed and transported to a crematorium or burial site. Sometimes, there will be a funeral procession in which pallbearers will carry the casket to and from the hearse.

Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to dress modestly in dark colors. Immediate members of the family may choose to wear white and request that the rest of the guests dress in black. If unsure, checking with the family about the dress code is a good idea. Guests may be asked to remove their shoes before entering the monastery or home where the funeral is being held.

Resources on Buddhist Funerals:

- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/buddhist-funerals/>
- <https://www.dignityfunerals.co.uk/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funeral/religious-funerals/buddhist-funerals/>
- <https://www.empathy.com/funeral/buddhist-traditions-in-death-and-mourning>

Buddhist Mourning Period and Grief

The way Buddhist families and communities chose to grieve is extremely personal and should be tailored to best serve their individual needs. Some may want to be surrounded by family and loved ones while others might prefer private meditation and spiritual reflection. While there is no right or wrong way for Buddhists to mourn their dead, the religion has some traditions that are intended to support the mourners in their time of grief.

After the funeral ends, some mourners might want to hold a reception or continuation of gathering in their home. There, they may construct a new altar to continue honoring the deceased. They may also take special care to perform community-oriented acts of kindness to honor the passing of a loved one. These acts can include feeding the monastic community with home-cooked meals, volunteering, or donating to charities. It is believed that these acts not only honor the dead but also help the family with the process of grieving. The community usually supports the immediate family in mourning by cooking meals or bringing food, helping with childcare, performing daily tasks like cleaning, and offering to listen and be a source of comfort.

While there is no official timeline for the mourning period, many Buddhists will continue to honor the passing of a loved one by holding celebrations on the 3rd, 7th, 49th and 100th days after the death of a person. This creates more opportunities for community gathering and reflection on the passing of a loved one.

To express condolences for the family, phone calls, visits, and cards are appropriate. Some families may wish to receive flowers while others will not, so checking before ordering flowers is a good idea. Empathic gestures, small acts of kindness, and a willingness to listen are all ways in which people can express support for a grieving family.

Resources on Buddhist Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://www.econdolence.com/learning-center/religion-and-culture/buddhism/buddhist-periods-of-mourning?srsltid=AfmBOort8xZzuqWzT-1zJwLgaEjlz51RlcaA02olR4gHs8Vot7QplWxJ>
- <https://fullcirclegc.org/2022/05/10/how-buddhisms-built-in-grievance-process-helped-me/>

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- State Laws:
 - <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-laws>

Resources For Buddhist Theology on Death:

- <https://www.urbandharma.org/udharma5/viewdeath.html>
- <https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhism/wheel-of-life-bhavacakra/>
- <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/philosophy-facpubs/7/>

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- <https://fullcirclegc.org/2022/05/10/how-buddhisms-built-in-grievance-process-helped-me/>