

Tibetan Sky Burials and the Buddhist Cycle of Life

In the Himalayan region of Tibet, the way Buddhists have traditionally buried their dead is through something called sky burial. In a sky burial, the body of a Buddhist is prepared by the family as well as by a Buddhist monk or lama and is offered at the top of a mountain to be consumed by vultures. The practice is seen as a way of contributing to the cycle of life and releasing the soul from the physical body in order to transition to the next life through



reincarnation.

Sky burial is a very old tradition whose origins can be traced back to around the 8th century C.E.. Because of the harsh climate in the Himalayan mountains, disposition through exposure to the natural elements was the most

practical way to lay the body to its final rest. The practice also aligns with Buddhist teachings which value impermanence, compassion for all living beings, and the cycle of rebirth. Sky burials are the most common practice for Buddhists who are not monks and lamas of a high status.

After a person has died, they are wrapped in a white Tibetan cloth. Then, the body is moved to one corner of the house for a couple of days as family members and monks chant mantras to bless the body and release the soul from purgatory. It is typical that during this time families cease all other daily activities in order to allow the soul of the deceased to have a peaceful transition.

The family usually chooses a lucky day for the body to be taken up the mountain, and lets the Celestial Burial Master know when they have decided. The day before the burial, the family undresses the body, and ties it to be sitting in a fetal posture, to represent the way that the body first came into the world.

At the celestial burial grounds, Buddhist monks and lamas chant sutras that are recited to help release the soul from the body. Then, an incense called “su” smoke is burnt, which is meant to attract the Himalayan Griffon Vultures. This large bird of prey is the primary scavenger in a sky burial, and considered to be a holy bird in Buddhist tradition.



The Celestial Burial Master is responsible for dealing with the body, which in some traditions, is done with a joyful attitude to ensure the soul is at ease during the ceremony. The Burial Master cuts the body into smaller pieces, so that the vultures can more easily consume it. If the birds eat the body immediately, it means that the body was free of sin and that the soul transitioned to the next life with ease. When only the bones remain, the Burial Master will grind them up to later burn, as leaving any remains of the human can tether them to this life.

The sky burial is seen as a final act of compassion as it feeds the holy birds and prevents them from eating other small creatures they may have otherwise eaten. It is also aligned with the principle of reincarnation and returning the body back to the cycle of life. The unique form of body disposition is a way that Buddhists align their funerary practices with their religious beliefs through compassion, impermanence, and unattachment.

Citations

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Photo 1:

“Scene of Sky Burial in Larung Gar Buddhist Academy”, *Tibet Vista*, <https://www.tibettravel.org/tibetan-local-customs/tibetan-funeral.html>, Accessed June 17, 2026.

Photo 2:

“Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*.” Bayly, Alex, *eBird*, <https://ebird.org/species/himgri1>, Accessed June 17, 2026.