

Buddha-dharma and Death

Buddha-dharma teaches that death is a part of life, and that although none of us can predict what may significantly alter our lives, we are always embraced in absolute Wisdom and Compassion. To live fully, therefore, is to be prepared for all events with trust and serenity, and avoiding a morbid preoccupation with death and concern about what will happen to us when we die.

Death clarifies life's truths. Dying is part of the human condition. To live decently and then serenely leave this world is total fulfillment.

When Death Occurs

When death occurs, the following steps should be considered:

1. Makuragyo

The first service conducted after death is the Makuragyo, literally "Pillow Sutra". It is chanted at a person's deathbed, hence the term "pillow-sutra".

Makuragyo is conducted to convey a feeling of Compassion that soothes the pain of losing someone whom we love and cherish.

2. Selecting Funeral Personnel - Duties and Responsibilities:

- a. Chairperson – The Chairperson governs the proceedings, so the person selected should be close to the family of the deceased and of the Buddhist faith.
- b. Organist – The organist performs the music decided upon for the service. In most cases, the temple organist is used.
- c. Personal History of Deceased - The person selected for this function will relate the major events in the life of the deceased. This function is often performed by the chairperson. To simplify the chairperson's duties, however, it is ideally performed by a different individual.
- d. Words of Condolence (Choji) - The person selected for this function should be a close personal friend of the deceased. He or she will express words of condolence to the family of the deceased,

sharing personal experiences with the deceased.

- e. Telegrams (Choden) - The Telegram Representative burns incense, bows with gassho, and places the telegrams beside the incense burner. Sometimes the representative will read a telegram, especially one from a relative in Japan or from a prominent person.
- f. Words of Appreciation - The person selected for this function will thank all those attending for sharing in the funeral, for their koden, the floral pieces, and most of all, for their understanding and sympathy towards the family of the deceased.
- g. Pallbearers (Kansoku) - The pallbearers carry the casket to the hearse. They are usually selected from among the closest of the deceased's friends.
- h. Receptionists (Uke-tsuke) - The receptionists read and record koden envelopes containing monetary offerings to the family of the deceased.
- i. Floral Registrars (Hana-galaro) - The floral registrars record all floral arrangements received.

j. Incense Representatives – Incense Representatives are persons who represent organizations that the deceased was a member of. When they are called, they go to the front, bow, burn incense, place their hands together in gassho and bow, step back and back once more before returning to their seat.

k. Ushers – The ushers seat the guests. If programs are available, they offer one to each guest.

Minister

The resident minister of the temple is always the officiant. Ministers and functionaries from other religious traditions should not be invited to officiate at a Buddhist funeral.

Date and Time

Be sure the date and time is acceptable to the temple and the minister.

Location

The funeral can be held at your Buddhist temple or a funeral home. A Buddhist temple is primarily a place to hear the

Buddha-dharma; it is a dojo for reflecting on our relationship with Amida Buddha.

3. The Funeral Ritual

The funeral ritual or service consists of many distinct steps, as follows:

When you enter the hondo, one or more receptionists (uketsuke) will receive koden envelopes on behalf of the family of the deceased. The uketsuke committee records the name, address, and amount enclosed in the envelope. Ushers will pass out printed service programs and direct guests to their seats. Just before the funeral service begins, the immediate family of the deceased is seated in the hondo. The parts of the service listed above are described below.

a. Kansho (Calling Bell) - The kansho begins the funeral service. During the ringing of the kansho, the guests are asked to rise, and the casket is brought into the hondo and placed in front of the naijin. In most cases, the casket is opened. Later, the guests burn incense and view the body. The open casket and viewing of the body at the beginning of the funeral

service is in keeping with the Buddhist emphasis on the acceptance of death.

b. Kanzen Dokkyo (Casket-Before-Chanting-Sutra) - The minister or ministers then enter the hondo and stand in front of the casket. They bow and "chant before the casket".

When the Kanzen Dokkyo is completed, the minister or ministers burn incense and enter the altar area(Naijin). The officiant (Doshi) burns incense and remain behind for the Homyo-juyo.

c. Homyo Juyo (Dharma-Name-Presentation) - This is a Buddhist name given to the deceased. The homyo is made up of two Chinese characters and is preceded by the character "Shaku" for males and "Shakuni" for females, both meaning "disciple of the Buddha". A Homyo card with the deceased's name, Buddhist name, and vital statistics is then placed in the casket and another given to the principal mourner. A third copy is kept in the temple records.

d. Butsuzen Dokkyo (Buddha-Before-Chanting-Sutra) - The chanting of the sutra before the Buddha now commences. The

sutra here is not actually a sutra, but a gatha, the Shoshin-ge, written by Shinran Shonin. At this point, the family of the deceased will burn incense, view the body, and return to their seats. They are followed, in turn, by relatives, pallbearers, and the other guests. Burning incense symbolizes preparation of one's mind to receive the Teaching. The viewing of the body is an act of recognition and acceptance of death. It is customary to bow as one passes the immediate family after viewing the body. The funeral ritual proper ends here and the ministers usually retire from the Najin, The Chairman will then burn incense and return to his podium to begin the second part of the funeral service.

e. Gatha - The gatha or hymn is almost always Nadame, a hymn of condolence. The first two verses of this gatha are usually sung in Japanese.

f. Ryaku-reki (Abridged-History) - Following the gatha is an opening address by the Chairman and the reading of the ryaku-reki, a short history of the deceased.

g. Daihyo-shoko (Representative-Offering-of-Incense) - The daihyo-shoko is

the burning of incense by persons representing close friends; representing organizations in which the deceased was a member; representing organizations in which immediate family members were involved; and representing the temple. The Chairman reads the name of the representative and the organization being represented. The representative will then burn incense, bow to the bereaved family and take his seat.

h. Choji (Condolence-words) - Though usually translated "eulogy;" the choji are words of condolence given by a good friend of the deceased. The eulogy, as is understood in the United States, is technically not a part of the Jodo-Shinshu tradition. The choji is often omitted.

i. Choden (Condolence-Telegram) - Telegrams that have been received on behalf of the deceased are either all read, a representative number are read, or none are read.

j. Gatha - The guests again rise to sing the third and fourth verses of the gatha, Nadame.

k. Howa (Dharma-Talk) - The Howa is a sermon or talk given by the minister.

l. Shaji (Gratitude-Words) - The funeral ends with words of appreciation to those attending the funeral and to those involved in conducting it. The shaji is usually given by a relative of the immediate family.

The funeral closes with final words by the Chairman who also announces the time and place of the burial or cremation the following day. The casket is then closed and taken out of the hondo, followed by the family and guests.

4. Post-Funeral Considerations

Refreshments (Otoki) - Otoki is not required; rather, it is a way of getting together to share in the memory of the deceased. It is also an important enriching and renewing social occasion.

Koden – Temple and ministers - An honorarium is generally given by the deceased's family to the temple and to the minister for his services.

5. Kodon

Kodon is a monetary offering given by attendees to the deceased's family and taken to the funeral service. It's a monetary offering given as a gesture of condolence to the family of the deceased.

Kodon never has to be given.

6. Burial or Cremation Services

The burial or cremation service is usually held the morning after the funeral.

If it is a burial service, the casket is usually not opened. A short gatha is chanted by the minister and all those attending place flowers taken from the funeral wreaths on the casket. In the case of a cremation service, the casket is usually opened in the crematorium chapel with the service being the same as in the case of the burial service. The ashes are buried at a later time or kept in the temple nokotsu-do or Columbarium.

Immediately following the burial or cremation service, the shonanoka, or 7th.

Day Memorial Service is held at the temple. From the day of the death to the shonanoka, a period of six or seven days has usually elapsed. Following the shonanoka service, it is traditional for the family and those friends attending the memorial service to have a meal together, called otoki.

7. The Family Memorial Service

Hoji (Dharma-Matter) Hoji was originally a general term for any ritual observance. It now refers specifically to a memorial service for members of a given family or clan. Chuin (In the Midst of Yin)

Chuin refers to the first 49-day period of mourning after death. It is marked by observances every seven days until the 49th day.

Jodo-Shinshu observes chuin in grateful memory of the deceased and as yet another opportunity to listen to the Dharma.

Although every 7th day until the 49th is sometimes still observed in the United States, observing the 7th and 49th day is

the more common practice. The 7th-day memorial service is called shonan-uka ("first-seventh-day") and is normally observed at the temple immediately following the burial or cremation service. The 49th day or shiju-ku-nichi is the next hoji usually observed.

Thereafter, the dates for hoji are:

1. 100th day
2. 1st year
3. 3rd year
4. 7th year
5. 13th year
6. 17th year
7. 25th year
8. 33rd year
9. 50th year
10. 100th year

Thereafter, observances are held at 50-year intervals.

