

The Culture of Funeral Ceremony with the View of Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract

This paper examines Myanmar funeral ceremony in Buddhism and more particularly in Myanmar, where many traditions are not based on Buddhist tradition and the funerals have included many of unnecessary, extraneous items and superstitious practices into the funeral rites. The extraneous items and practices vary according to the traditions and customs of the people. The word funeral means ‘not grace’ in Pāli language and different terms are used depending on the person who dies. Everybody encounters death and it can come anytime anywhere. Aging, suffering pain and death are part of life. This paper looks at the activities involved in Myanmar funeral ceremonies. In Myanmar funeral ceremony people do the activities such as washing the death body; tying thumbs and big toes, offering food to monks, the placement of strings with the body, breaking the pot, etc. These activities and their origins will be explored in this paper. This paper shows that the activities studied in this paper are not the tradition of Buddhism.

Keywords; funeral, death, tradition, Theravāda Buddhism, Hindu

Introduction

In Buddhism, the Buddha preached about the death which is toward the immortality of the soul (with which the self is identified) and the corresponding devaluation of the body. In Buddhism, death is due to four causes, namely, (1) expiry of life -span (2) the cessation of kammic forces (3) combination of the above two and (4) untimely death due to an interrupting kammic force, Upacchedaka kamma. (ADL,1999: 226).

In the 12th & 13th Centuries, the Buddhists in Myanmar accepted that death was the absence of breath. They also accepted that there are two kinds of death: natural death and unnatural or violent death. (VismṬ,1:287) Natural death refers to death that occur from nature causes such as one of the ninety-six types of diseases or old age. Unnatural death is one that occurs as a result of the accident, through unusual circumstances such as suicide or childbirth (Hla Phe,2004:154).

The Buddhists in Myanmar of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries conceived death as a mere cessation of life. The expression they used then was *thei-de* from *athet thei- de* life ceases. Instances of the indiscriminate application of this term in the stone inscriptions of that period to the death of every being irrespective of status, rank or sacredness are not rare. It was used for the death of even in Buddha (Hla Phe,2004:153). Everybody in society has involved in funeral ceremony (Sakyavamsa,2012:23). In Myanmar the ancestors held funeral ceremonies according to traditional customs in the past. Because most people in Myanmar are Buddhists and Buddhist practices were added to that. Despite some regional differences, funeral ceremony activities in Myanmar are very much the same.

The word funeral

The word funeral is the same with the pāli word “*petakicca*”(EP,1979:216) and it also means ‘not grace’ in Pāli language. It is called *asubha* (*ma-thā*) in Myanmar language (Sakyavamsa,2012:183). The word *Asubha* in Myanmar means unpleasant in Pāli. It is the

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combination of “a” and “subha (HS,1999;1056)”. The word “a” is a negative prefixed to nouns in here (PE,1920;1) and the word “subha” means lucky, auspicious and pleasant.(HS,1999:149;PE,1920;242). Both Pāli and Myanmar are used in combinations with other words to form funeral terms. These are as follow

petakicca (a thu ba / mathā)	- a funeral, a corpse (EP,1979:216)
petakicca geha (a thu ba ein/ mathā ein)	- funeral house (EP,1979:216)
Chava (a thu ba alaung/ mathā alaung)	- corpse(EP,1979:109:Hla Phe,2004:154155)
a thu ba cha / mathā cha	- convey the corpse to the cremation or burial ground
a thu ba po / mathā po	- go or join other people in a funeral procession

Various term of the word die

Pāli language has raised the standard of Myanmar culture and has enriched Myanmar language. In the 15th century the standard of Myanmar languages was highly developed. Therefore, there are several usages of the word “die” in Myanmar language (Hla Phe, 2004:268). They are different according to the people’s status, rank or wealth. They are ---

For ordinary people

the de	- die(marati) (EP,1979;141)
sone de	- end, life end
the sone de	- die-end, life ceases for good
shaw b	- die (slang)
gant b	- die (slang)
thwar b	- life end

For leaders

aneik- sa yauk- te (anicca) (HS,1999;58)	- to reach the state of impermanence
kwaē lwin te	- impermanence arrives

For the mother of monks

kan koun de (anta)(PE,1920;17)	- karma exhaust or end
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For royalty

nat ywar san te	- to dwell in the abode of the nat or celestial being
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For Divine beings and Brahma

su te de (cuti in pāli) (PE,1920;92;HU,1999;395))	- die
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For monks

Pyan lwin daw mu de	- return to his own abode
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For Buddha and Saint

Pareik neik ban win daw mu te (parinibbāna in pāli) (HS,1999;625) Nivarna (Hla Phe,2004:268)	
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Materials and Methods

The study is based on primary Buddhist sources. The data have been collected from published sources such as Pāli texts. The data were analyzed by using descriptive method.

Findings

In Myanmar the ancestors held funeral ceremonies according to traditional customs in the past. The most customs about the funeral ceremony in Myanmar nowadays do not belong to Theravada Buddhist tradition. The preparation of a funeral ceremony activities in Myanmar are as follow;

Washing the death body

An important funeral ceremony activity is the washing of the death body (HMCC,1906:539). The death body is washed because it has not been cleaned since the dead person was taken ill (Hla Phe,2004:158). Generally, the body is washed by relatives, mostly by males. Some women do not wash the body because they are afraid of ghosts (BS,1982:28). This tradition may come from the Vedas, one of the earliest texts in Hindu tradition.

Tying thumbs and big toes

The practice of tying thumbs and big toes aims to keep the body position which changes due to chemical reaction (Hla Phe,2004:247). Theravāda Buddhism makes no reference to this.

Placing short stem of banana plant

The practice of pacing a short stem of banana plant is placed is only done when the body is that of an unmarried woman. Placing short stem of banana plant with the body will help her get husband in her next life as a woman. This custom is found some regions. This practice may not agree with Buddhist views because the Buddha does not preach that if a woman dies, she will become woman in her next life. The Buddha preached that a person's rebirth is mostly determined by his/her state of mind immediately prior to death. If s/he dies with greed (lobha), s/he will become a hungry ghost, if s/he dies with hatred (dosa) s/he will go to hell and if s/he dies of ignorance (moha), s/he will become an animal being (Sakyavamsa,2012:183). They all fare according to their deeds finding the fruit of merit or demerit. (FoB,1991:194)

Breaking the water pot

The water pot refers to the pot of water used to wash the death body. A pot full of water is used to wash a dead body. (<https://factsanddetails.com>).The body has to be washed from the right leg and thigh, to the back, to the shoulder and to the head. The body then has to be turned left for seven times. (HMCC,1906:539) Thanakhā is then placed on the face of the death. Once washed, new clothes are put on the body of death and the pot of used water is kept under the bier. This pot is then broken on the day the corpse is cremated or buried (MC,1990 :218). Breaking the water pot is not also a Buddhist tradition and it may come from Hindu tradition.

Adding piece of string

Called leikpya kwe de (Sakyavamsa,2012:23), the adding of a piece of string is done to prevent the ghost of the death person from returning to the village. The piece of string for every living member of the household is placed in the coffin. This intends to separate the spirit of the dead person from any attachment to the living.

Ferry fare

When a person dies, the relatives put a coin in the mouth of the death body), known as a ferry fare. People assume that the soul, in passing from its present to its future abode, must cross some river on a ferry, and the coin is used to pay for the passage. It may come from Hindu tradition. It is believed that the spirit is not reborn immediately, but it takes seven days before being reborn. (During these seven days, the spirit can go anywhere. (<https://factsanddetails.com>) The ferry fare aims to helping the spirits cross the river and move on. This money is often taken by grave diggers they use the money to burn the death body.

Offering food to the monks

On the day of his/her death, the family members offer food to the monks for the benefit of the deceased. Three or seven day later, the family members again offer food to the monks again. The feast of a funeral ceremony held on seven days after the death of a person. burial of the deceased is called yet- le zun as ‘a feast. At the yet-le zun ceremony the monks give the five precepts to the assembly and invoke to devas, take refuge in the Three Gems, then the monks recite metta sutta and one monk who is the leader preaches a short sermon (Hla Phe,200:252) After a short sermon, the Buddhist water drop libation ceremony is held. The main idea of this ceremonial libation is that donors share their merits to accrue all living beings in all 31 planes of existence. It means that the members of families do merits for themselves but not the death person (Aṭṭii, 1956:102).

In Buddhism, after the death consciousness of one life, rebirth consciousness arises in new life immediately. A new life, a rebirth, occurs instantaneously. (ADL,1999:237) The spirits of deadly go to five planes of existence. The five planes of existence are deva gati (heaven), manussagata (human society), niyara gati (hell), peta gati (hungry ghosts) and tiracchāna gati (animal). (KhAiii,1979:123) (Sakyavamsa,2012:24) So, the death person cannot get the merits. Out of these five planes of existences, The surviving family could not do any for the deceased. Peta gati is still strong in the family if the good deeds he has done are not exhausted. The wemanika peta attains the state of transcended and when one desire good deeds, one attains the good deeds done for the deceased. (except for peta gati). Donations made for deceased can only be made with a life in which “the deceased can be called “well-done(sadhu)”.

Moreover, the death person also cannot get the virtue of three germs. In Buddhism, there are two categories that are not take refuge in three germs. The first one is that who does not take refuge the right belief but take refuge mistaken belief. The second is the die people who take refuge the three germs. (Ashinobasa,2002,459) By offering foods to the monks, the family members can get merits but not death person. So, it is also not Buddhist tradition.

Calling the spirit of death people

After the funeral procession returns from the ceremony, one of the relatives breaks off a branch from a tree and brings it to the house, where the soul or ghost may rest for seven days until the monks recite the paritta. At the same time, a family member of possible malevolence of the ghost, the spouse of the deceased invites him to attend this paritta ceremony as if he were not already in the house (BS,1982:253). The people also believed that the spirit lingers around the house during the period of seven days after his or her death. So, the people called the spirit of a death person by bringing the broken a branch in to the house. This is also opposite of Buddha’s view. The Buddhist pointed out that there can be no ghosts, since immediately upon the death of a person, the “spirit” is reborn. According to Abhidhamma, rebirth (conception) takes place immediately after the death of a being without any intermediate state. (WBB,1993:101)

Discussion

In a nut shell, the preparation of a funeral ceremony in Myanmar includes many activities, such as washing the death body, tying thumbs and big toes, offering food to monks, placement of strings with the body, the breaking of the pot (Sakyavamsa,2012:290) They are not the Buddha's instructions connected with the death body in the Mahāparinibbāna sutta.

The conversation between Ānanda & the Buddha (Theme of the Mahāparinibbāna sutta)

In the Mahāparinibbāna sutta of the Mahā Vagga, Ānanda asked the Blessed One before the Buddha attained Nivarna (Dii,1960:60,138), What should be done with the regard to the body of the Blessed One? Ānanda asked for three times. After three times the Buddha instructed Ānanda that his body "should be dealt like the remains of a Universal Monarch. Venerable Sir, what is done to the body of a Universal Monarch? Ānanda asked. Ānanda, the body of a Universal Monarch is wrapped up in new cloth (made in Kāsi). After being wrapped up in new (kāsi) cloth, the body is wrapped up in carded cotton wool. After being wrapped up in carded cotton wool, it is wrapped up in new (kasi) cloth again. In this way the body of the Universal Monarch is wrapped up in five hundred successive layers (of cloth and cotton wool) Then it is enclosed in a golden oil vat covered over by another golden vat. Then a pyre of all kinds of scented wood is built, and the body of the Universal Monarch is cremated. A stupa (i.e., a monumental mound with dome) to (the honour of) the Universal Monarch is built at the junction of the four highways. (DA ii,1960,118).Ānanda, this is what is done to the body of a Universal Monarch. Ānanda, in the same way as is done to the body of a Universal Monarch, so should it be done to the body of the Tathagata. A stupa to (the honour of) the Tathagata should be built at the junction of the four highways. At that stupa people will do the activities such as offering flowers or incense or scented powder, or paying homage, and reverence in their minds. The benefit and happiness will accrue to such people for a long time. The Buddha also preached about the four persons who are worthy of a stupa being built to their honour but did not preach about all people (Dii,1960,168).

Nowadays, when the Buddhist monk passed away, the people do the funeral activities mentioned in the Mahāparinibbāna sutta but when the ordinary Buddhist dies, the people did not follow the several activities mentioned in the Mahāparinibbāna sutta.

The funeral ceremonies in Myanmar have included many of unnecessary, extraneous items and superstitious practices into the funeral rites. Some of the activities in funeral ceremony may come from Hindu custom. The extraneous items and practices vary according to the traditions and customs of the people. They were introduced in olden days by people who probably could not understand the nature of the life, nature of the death, and what life would be after death When such ideas were incorporated into Buddhist practices, people tended to blame Buddhism for expensive funeral rites. (WBB,1993:175)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the preparation of a funeral ceremony in Myanmar are not Buddhist funeral rites. The most customs about the funeral ceremony in Myanmar are not a real Buddhist funeral A real Buddhist funeral is a simple, solemn and dignified religious service.

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