

2.7 Ceremonies and rituals associated with death and mourning

Buddhist beliefs about death

Buddhist tradition teaches that when a Buddhist dies, their karmic energy leaves their body and is reborn in a new one. Death therefore is seen as an end, only a transition from one form to another. While Buddhists will naturally grieve the loss of people they loved, they also bear in mind what the Buddha taught about impermanence being a natural part of life. Funerals are a valuable reminder of this teaching of impermanence. Nothing lasts, and people suffer less if they are able to accept this fact.

Funeral customs differ between the various Buddhist traditions and from one country to the next. Some funerals can be very elaborate and even include many rituals, while others are simple, reflective and calm.

Theravada funerals

In Theravada communities, very little money is usually spent on a funeral. Instead the family and friends may donate to a worthy cause and transfer the merit to the deceased. (We saw on page 36 how some Theravada Buddhists believe it is possible to transfer the kamma created by your own good actions and deeds to someone else. In this case, the good kamma that is created by donating to a worthy cause is transferred to the dead person, to help them have a more favourable rebirth.)

Rituals that transfer merit to the deceased may also be performed by family members or other mourners. For example, they might offer cloth to make new robes to a senior monk of a nearby monastery on behalf of the deceased person.

“ At the hour of death, the king and the beggar are exactly equal in that no amount of relatives or possessions can affect or prevent death. But who is the richer at the time of death? If the beggar has created more merits, then although he looks materially poor he is really the rich man. ”

Thubten Zopa Rinpoche (Nepalese Buddhist monk)

A shrine may be set up to display the deceased's portrait, along with offerings to the Buddha of candles, incense and flowers. An image of the Buddha is usually placed beside or in front of the shrine. Monks will often attend a funeral of a lay person. They may give a sermon and perform Buddhist rites.

The deceased may be cremated or buried, although cremation is traditional and more common. Monks will perform the last rites before the casket containing the dead person is sealed. Family members may assist in lifting the casket as a final act of service, while others present observe a moment of respectful silence. During the funeral procession,

Objectives

- Understand Buddhist teachings about death.
- Know about different Buddhist ceremonies and rituals associated with death and mourning.



▲ A Buddhist funeral in Thailand with a shrine to the deceased person

family members may walk behind the hearse. All mourners should be sending good thoughts to the family and contemplating the impermanence of life.

■ Ceremonies and rituals in Tibet and Japan

Ceremonies and rituals associated with death differ greatly between the various Tibetan and Japanese traditions, and between geographical areas. One of the best-known Tibetan traditions is that of 'sky burial', in which the body is left in a high place as a gift to the vultures. In a mountainous country short of firewood and often too frozen for grave-digging, giving away one's body was seen as both a practical and generous act. However, it is increasingly customary to burn the body instead. Revered teachers have always been cremated, and the remains placed in a chorten (a memorial structure also known as a stupa) to become a site of worship. In all cases, ceremonies involving prayers and offerings of yak-butter lamps may be made every seven days for 49 days after the death.

In Japanese Pure Land traditions, the coffin may be placed with the head pointing west, while those assembled chant 'Namo Amida Bu' as they process around it. Nichiren Buddhist funerals include readings from the *Lotus Sutra*. It is common across all Japanese traditions for relations to gather after the cremation and pick out the bones from the ashes, using chopsticks. As in Tibet, these remains may be kept for 49 days and prayers offered every seventh day.



▲ Tibetan monks at a funeral

Discussion activity

Do you think that Buddhist teachings about the naturalness of impermanence could make it easier to accept the fact that someone you love has died?

Extension activity

Research what Buddhists believe happened to the Buddha when he died. How did he die, and what was his view of an afterlife?

Activities

- 1 Read the following statements. Which do you think Buddhists would agree with and which do you think Buddhists would disagree with? Give reasons for your answers.
 - a 'There is no life but this one. When you die, that's it. What is important is making the most of this life because it's all you've got.'
 - b 'I believe life is the same as all energy; it never ends but rather passes from one living thing to another.'
 - c 'My Nan died five years ago but somehow I feel that she is still with me at times. Your spirit has to live on after death.'
 - d 'I know that I believe in a heaven. I want to go there when I die. I can pray to God and he will take me there at my death.'
- 2 Some Theravada Buddhists believe they can transfer merit to another person. Explain what this means, and how this belief can be seen in a Theravada funeral.
- 3 Write out a script for a radio interview with a Buddhist monk. What questions about death and mourning would you like to put to this monk, and what answers do you think he would give?

★ Study tip

Buddhism is enormously diverse across and within traditions and countries. One can never say that all Buddhists believe or do exactly the same thing.

Summary

You should now have some understanding of Buddhist teachings about death and impermanence. You should also have some idea of the variety of rituals and ceremonies associated with death and mourning in Tibet, Japan, and Theravada communities.

2.8 Wesak and Parinirvana Day

Buddhist festivals and retreats

Buddhist **festivals** are usually a time for joy and celebration, although some festivals (such as Parinirvana Day) are more solemn occasions. They give Buddhists an opportunity to remember and celebrate the Buddha's life and teachings, and an opportunity to meet and practise together.

Some festivals are specific to a certain tradition or country. For example, Mahayana Buddhists might celebrate the birthdays of certain bodhisattvas. Most of the major festivals celebrate significant events in the Buddha's life, such as his first sermon after his enlightenment (celebrated by Theravada Buddhists as Asalha Puja Day).

Retreats are popular in the West. There are many places in the UK, for example, that offer Buddhist retreats. Many of them give an opportunity to spend a weekend or week away from everyday life, with a group of people who are similarly interested in the religion. They might be held in a monastery or Buddhist centre. Retreats vary in structure and focus on different aspects, but they generally give people an opportunity to deepen their understanding of Buddhist practice. They might involve meditation, talks and study groups, workshops, and taking part in rituals.

In Theravada communities, monks observe Vassa, an annual retreat that lasts for three months during the rainy season. During these three months, monks only leave their temples when necessary, and dedicate more time to meditation and study.

Wesak

Wesak (also known as Vesak or Buddha day) is probably the best known and most important of all the Buddhist festivals. It is celebrated on the full moon during the month of Vesak (which usually falls in May). The festival commemorates three major events in the Buddha's life: his birth, his enlightenment and his passing into parinirvana (the final state of nibbana). All three of these events are said to have happened on a full moon. Wesak is a festival to honour and remember the Buddha and his teachings. It has been celebrated since at least the early twentieth century, although only became a public holiday in the 1950s.



▲ Monks lighting candles at a temple in Thailand for Wesak



▲ Thousands of lanterns are lit at the Maha Vihara temple in Malaysia for Wesak

Objectives

- Understand what festivals and retreats mean to Buddhists.
- Understand the origins, celebrations and importance of Wesak and Parinirvana Day.

Key terms

- **festival:** a day or period of celebration for religious reasons
- **retreat:** a period of time spent away from everyday life in order to focus on meditation practice
- **Wesak:** a Theravada festival that celebrates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away
- **Parinirvana Day:** a Mahayana festival that commemorates the Buddha's passing away

To celebrate Wesak, Buddhists may light up their homes with candles, lamps or paper lanterns, and put up decorations. They will make offerings to the Buddha, and may give gifts such as food, candles and flowers to the monks in the local monastery. In return, the monks may lead some meditation, chant from the Buddhist scriptures, or give sermons about the Buddha's teachings. These will focus on the Buddha's life, in particular his enlightenment.

Wesak celebrations vary from country to country. In some places, such as Singapore, there are ceremonies where caged birds and animals are released as a symbol of liberation, and to signify the release from past troubles and wrong-doings. In countries such as Indonesia, giant paper lanterns are lit to float up into the night sky. Light is an important symbol during this festival, and is associated with a number of different meanings: the idea that light can be used to overcome darkness or ignorance, the fact that the Buddha showed people how to become enlightened, and as a symbol of hope.

Parinirvana Day

Parinirvana Day is a Mahayana festival that is celebrated during February to remember the Buddha's passing into parinirvana. As might be expected, the festival is a more solemn occasion than Wesak. For Buddhists, it is a chance to reflect on the fact of their own future death, and to remember friends or relatives who have recently passed away. The idea that all things are impermanent, which is central to Buddhist teaching, has a real focus for the day.

The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* is an important Buddhist scripture that describes the Buddha's last days, and passages from it are often read on Parinirvana Day. Buddhists might spend the day reading this text and meditating at home, or joining others in temples and monasteries for puja and meditation.

Some places will organise retreats, because the day is seen as a suitable occasion for quiet reflection and meditation.

Parinirvana Day is also a traditional day for pilgrimage, and many Buddhists will visit the city of Kushinagar in India, which is where the Buddha is believed to have died.

Activities

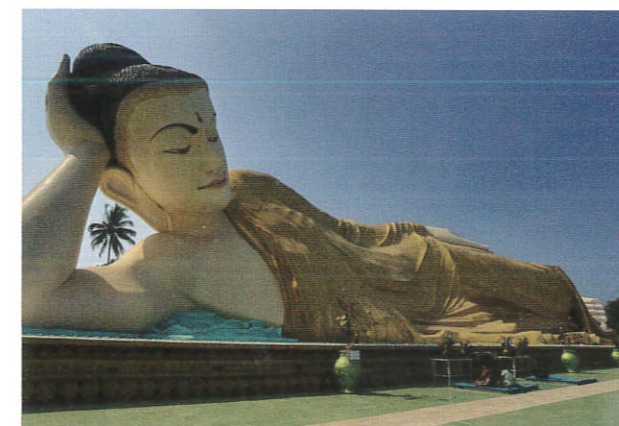
- 1 Explain the difference between a festival and a retreat.
- 2 Light is an important symbol in Wesak celebrations. Think about the properties of light and explain why light is used as a symbol during this festival.
- 3 Do you feel it might be helpful to spend a day focusing on the topic of death and impermanence? Give reasons for your answer.
- 4 'Religious festivals are just an excuse for people to have a good time and nothing more.' Evaluate this statement. Remember to include more than one point of view, and refer to Buddhist teachings in your answer.

Discussion activity

Discuss with a partner why you think festivals might be important to many Buddhists.

Extension activity

Research the history behind Wesak Day and Parinirvana Day, and make your own notes on how the festivals started and then developed.



▲ 'The reclining Buddha' is a type of statue that shows the Buddha lying down during his final illness, about to enter parinirvana

★ Study tip

There is not a single festival that is common to all Buddhist traditions worldwide. The festivals described here are just some examples.

Summary

You should now be able to explain why festivals and retreats are important to Buddhists. You should also be able to describe what happens during Wesak and Parinirvana Day, and explain the significance of these festivals.