

Buddhist Management of the Dead and Covid-19

Introduction

Buddhism is of course accustomed to addressing epidemics and natural disasters, as recorded in Buddhist scriptures. In general, Buddhism is undemanding and flexible with respect to disaster response and funeral rites, advocating a pragmatic approach. Nor do local cultural accretions pose any particular impediment, and WHO and ICRC forensic advice can therefore be followed.

Most Buddhist societies cremate their dead, and Gautama Buddha was himself cremated on a funeral pyre. No major doctrinal significance is attached to cremation, however, and Buddhism permits both cremation and burial. Moreover, because of the cost of timber, burial has increasingly replaced cremation in rural areas, while urban areas are served by modern crematoria.¹

Buddhist-majority Thailand, for example, continues to allow both cremation and burial during the Covid-19 crisis, while the Sri Lankan government's present position that all Covid-19 dead bodies must be cremated - thereby upsetting the Muslim community- is somewhat of an outlier.

Vajrayana (Tibetan) Buddhists also practice sky burial, whereby the dead body is exposed on a mountaintop to decompose or be scavenged by vultures or other wild animals.

Latest ICRC Forensics Advice

- Apart from physical distancing and avoiding contact, the ICRC advocates caution with respect to the handling of Covid-19 dead bodies, since it remains unclear for how long the risk of infection from the dead body or bodily fluids persists.
- PPE must be used by those handling the body, which must be completely wrapped in a body bag that is not easily penetrated (or double-bagged) before being moved to the mortuary,
- The body bag(s) should not be opened again prior to burial or cremation.
- If the family wish to see the body, they can use PPE to do so before the body is bagged.
- Bodies should not be embalmed or injected with preservatives, and autopsies must be done by a special officer if permitted by the family and the hospital director.
- Every effort should be made to ensure the reliable documentation, identification and traceability of the dead.
- While dead body management and funeral rites must be accelerated and adapted, hasty and careless disposal of the bodies must be avoided, and unidentified bodies should not be cremated under any circumstances.
- Whether or not the body is infectious, family members may well have been infected too, and funeral gatherings are highly inadvisable, regardless of how the dead body is handled, and have sometimes been banned.

Viable procedures for accelerated management of the dead which anticipate Buddhist practices are meanwhile epitomized by these instructions from Thailand's Ministry of Public Health:

1. When the patient dies, personnel responsible for handling the dead body must wear standard PPE.

¹ Crosby, Kate. 'Kamma Tsunami'

2. The body must be placed in a zip-lock, water resistant body bag. That bag (containing the body) is placed inside another bag (the body is double-bagged), the bag is tagged with the name of the deceased, and the outside of the bag disinfected.
3. There is to be no bathing of the body, no watering of the body, and no injections into the body.
4. Once the body is placed into the double-bags, there can be no reopening of the bags, and the double-bagged body must be refrigerated at the mortuary.
5. The body must be transported to the next of kin to proceed to the religious ceremony, for either cremation or burial. Again, there will be no reopening of the body bags.

Psychologically, Covid-19 has a tremendous impact on bereaved families, since the reduced time prior to internment or cremation limits last rites and the number of family members able to attend the corpse. This is sometimes magnified by the stigma attached to Covid-19 victims and their families, or to particular groups.

Buddhist leaders and clergy naturally play an important role in disseminating correct information and instructions to the public, also to mitigate stigma. They must support the dying and their families, adapt last rites and provide solace to grieving family members unable to bid farewell to their relatives as they would have wished.

Buddhist temples and monasteries often mobilise humanitarian support themselves, as well as facilitating access, acceptance and security for organisations like the ICRC, whether at the grassroots or central governmental level. Meanwhile, international Buddhist humanitarian organisations such as Buddha Tzu Chi have been at the forefront of the Covid-19 response in a number of Asian countries.

Epidemics and Mass Casualty Events in Buddhism

Very early in the history of Buddhism, short verses were recommended by the Buddha to provide protection from certain afflictions, and these formal *paritta* (*pirit* in Sri Lanka) recitations of sacred texts are still regarded as having the power to heal, protect and ward off danger.

All-night *paritta* recitations by monks are deemed particularly effective, and the Sri Lankan *Mahavamsa* contains the earliest historical reference to this practice, describing how Upatissa I of Anuradhapura instructed monks to recite the *Ratana Sutta* through the night when Sri Lanka was afflicted by plague and disease.² This practice continues in Theravada Buddhist contexts, and during the Covid-19 crisis senior Buddhist monks in Myanmar also performed mid-air recitations of *parittas* on a special aircraft flying above the country to ward off the outbreak. Importantly, *parittas* are also chanted at funerals.

With regard to mass casualty events, the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which devastated parts of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar, is particularly relevant in the Theravada Buddhist world. In Sri Lanka, monks were at the forefront of disaster response and mobilizing their communities, including the management of dead bodies and accelerated/adapted mass funeral rites. 'At the outset they led searches for dead bodies and arranged for mass burials of both humans and animals, to prevent the spread of disease. Traditional rites for the dead were performed collectively, on behalf of all.'³

The 2008 Wenchuan/Sichuan and 2010 Yushu/Qinghai earthquakes in China had a similarly catastrophic effect in the Tibetan Buddhist world, where monks adjusted traditional burial practices to meet the exigencies of the

² Wikipedia, 'Paritta'

³ Crosby, Kate. 'Kamma Tsunami'

situation and the sheer numbers of dead, switching from sky burial to mass cremation in a way that still honored local Buddhist traditions.⁴

Buddhist Funeral Rites

Death is understood by Buddhists as part of a continually repeating cycle of birth, death and rebirth in which their actions determine how they will be reincarnated in subsequent lives. Only arhats who have gained insight into the true nature of existence -thereby achieving nirvana- escape this cycle of rebirth. For most Buddhists, death therefore marks a transition to a new mode of existence. For those left behind, death is a reminder of Buddhist teachings on impermanence, and provides an opportunity to assist the deceased in attaining an auspicious rebirth through various merit making rituals.

Buddhist rites vary by region, culture, class, school, and lineage, but certain elements prevail regardless of tradition. While there are no universal rules governing when burial or cremation takes place, some Buddhist traditions specify after three days, and the body is generally washed and sometimes embalmed (not in Tibetan Buddhism) before being dressed in fine clothes and displayed in an open or closed casket in the home, funeral home or temple. In Chan and Zen Buddhism, relatives keep vigil with the body for up to 24 hours. Buddhism does not prohibit the donation of organs. Similarly, autopsies are seen as beneficial, though Buddhists do sometimes prefer that a medical examiner wait 3-4 days to allow time for the soul to leave the body.

As well as family and friends, monks or other clergy are generally invited to chant, say sermons or otherwise offer goodwill. Indeed, funerals are usually the only rite of passage that Theravāda Buddhist monks are involved in. The three-month death anniversary is another important milestone in many traditions, marking the end of the main mourning period.

The Covid-19 crisis has meant that these timelines are compressed, with cremation often permitted within 24 hours of death, while only a few close relatives might be allowed to attend the body and carry out the last rites using PPE.⁵ While death should ideally take place in an atmosphere of peace, calm and sensitivity, and there may be requests for the body to remain undisturbed for a period (a minimum of four hours is sometimes cited), even if this is not always be possible in overcrowded hospital wards. Some Buddhists have already devised short prayers and last rites which can be carried out in the absence of Buddhist clergy or knowledgeable lay persons if necessary, and much can also be done online.

Funeral Rites for Those of High Ethical Status

Though a detail, it should be noted that the manner in which a dead body is treated also depends on the spiritual or ethical status of the person, and special ceremonial cremation procedures, sometimes culminating in the erection of a stupa, are recommended for a fully enlightened Buddha, a *Paccakabuddha*, a disciple of the Buddha or a *Cakkavattirāja* (righteous wheel-turning monarch).⁶

⁴ Kilby, Christine

⁵ <https://japantoday.com/category/features/kuchikomi/mortuary-services-uneasy-over-funerals-cremations-for-covid-19-victims>

⁶ Prof PD Premasiri

Contributions:

Udo Krenzer, Sherry Fox Leonard and Eva Bruenisholz, ICRC Forensics

Prof PD Premasiri, Emeritus Professor, University of Peradeniya

Prof Kate Crosby, King's College London

Prof Asanga Tilakaratne, University of Colombo

Ven Mahinda Deegalle, Bath Spa University

Dr Sunil Kariyakarawana, Buddhist Chaplain to Her Majesty's Armed Forces

Prof Peter Harvey, Emeritus Professor University of Sunderland

Dr Christina Kilby, James Madison University

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