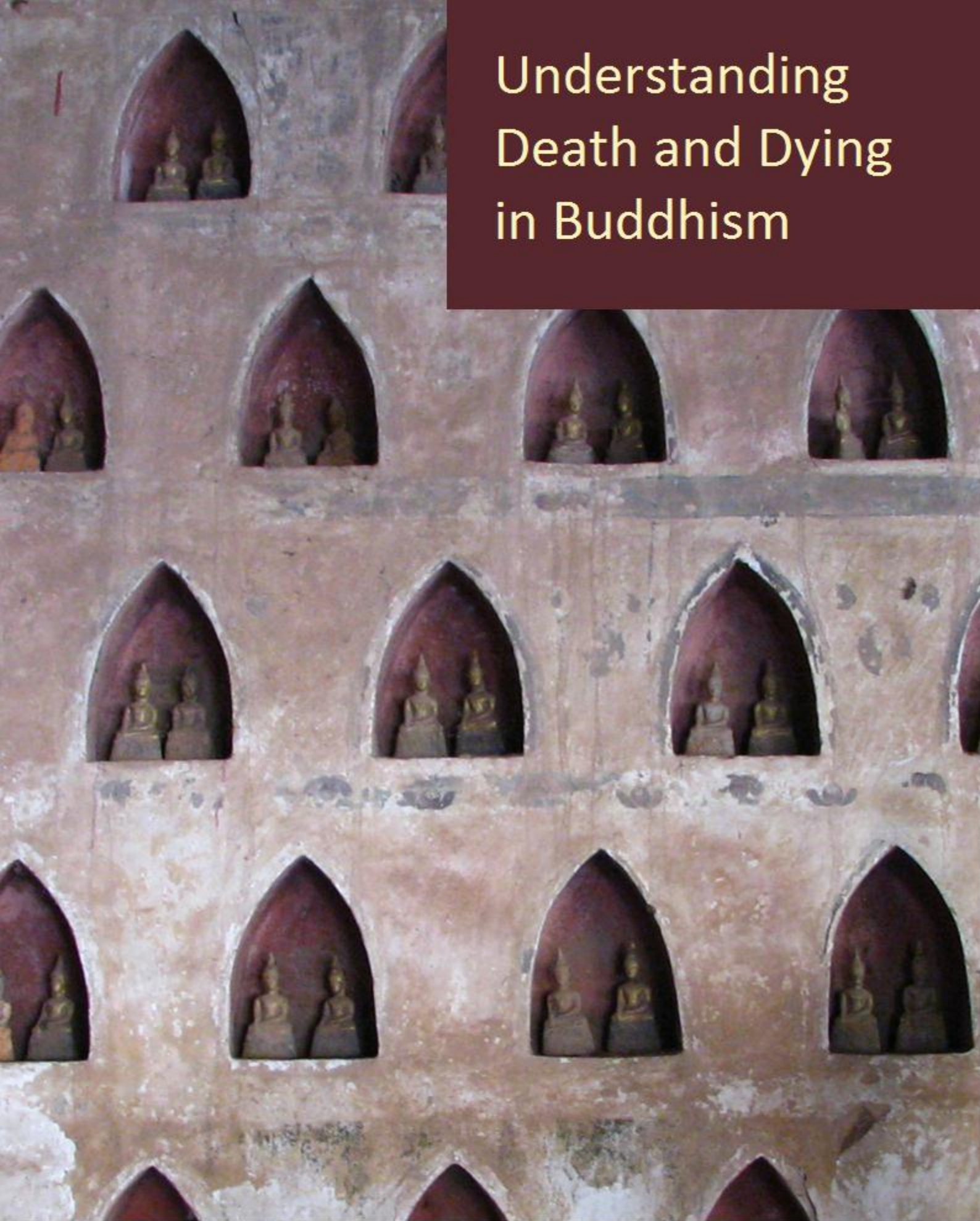


# Understanding Death and Dying in Buddhism



## Introduction

For a number of years a developing interest has been evident in Buddhist Chaplaincy. Practising Buddhists in the UK are developing their skills and knowledge and giving their time as volunteers and in providing care and support to those in various public institutions, including the NHS, Armed Forces, Schools, Colleges and Universities.

In the area of healthcare, pioneering work has been started by the Multi-Faith Healthcare Chaplaincy Group (MFGHC) through eight major world faiths developing endorsing mechanisms and training programmes in order to offer Hospitals and Hospices a high quality of trained volunteer capable of providing religious and spiritual care to all patients, whether they be of faith or of no faith.

Buddhist Healthcare Chaplaincy Group (BHCG) is a member of MFGHC and has emerged from across the Buddhist traditions as a group of people willing to support other individuals interested in this work.

BHCG is often asked to contribute to documents for those caring for others within the healthcare community by identifying patient's faith needs in specific areas, such as death and dying.

The wide diversity of approaches to Buddhist practice is equally apparent in interpretations of the Buddha's teachings on matters of death and dying. Consequently, many find the needs of dying Buddhist patients complex and difficult to identify.

'Understanding Death and Dying in Buddhism' is a welcome contribution to the literature, written clearly and concisely as well as capturing the richness and diversity of Buddhist practice. Both BHCG and MFGHC are keen to see the development of this and similar resources that contribute to a stronger research-basis to chaplaincy.

Keith Munnings

*Chairman, Buddhist Healthcare Chaplaincy Group and member of MFGHC*

# What Do Buddhists Practice?

## What do I need to know?

Buddhists recognise that there is a continuous cycle of life, death and rebirth. This cycle is known as *samsara*. The ultimate aim of Buddhist practice is to become free from *samsara*.

## What happens when someone dies?

When a person dies they are reborn into another life. Depending on the personal beliefs of the individual this can take different amounts of time. Tibetan Buddhists believe that there is an in-between stage known as the *bardo* which can take up to 49 days; Theravada Buddhists (from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia) consider that rebirth can be immediate. Those who attain enlightenment (*nirvana/nibbana*) do not get reborn upon their death.

## What can a person be reborn as?

Within Buddhism there are five or six possible forms that rebirth can take. These are from the highest to the lowest: gods, demi-gods, human, animal, hungry ghost and hell creature. Rebirth as a human being is considered to be particularly fortuitous as it is thought to be rare and it is held that one has the best chance for enlightenment when in this state of existence.

## How is a person's rebirth decided?

A person's rebirth is dependent on their previous thoughts and actions. Each intentional action, good or bad, gives rise to *karma/kamma*. Good *karma* will allow for a good rebirth and vice versa. The last moments of a person's life are important because their last thoughts and feelings will be a deciding factor in conditioning the first moment of the next life. Karma operates on an extremely large time scale in Buddhism. While a good death moment cannot cancel out any bad karma, it can be a head start to a better way of which is conducive to generating merit. This merit might eventually outweigh any bad karma. A common wish at funerals in Sri Lanka is: "May the deceased be reborn under Maitreya the future Buddha".

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# How to Prepare for Death

## What can I do to help?

The best thing that can be done for the dying person is to make sure they are mentally prepared for death. The last moments of life can affect the nature of

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rebirth. The more calm and prepared a person is the better their rebirth is considered to be. In order to help the dying person maintain religious thoughts flowers and images of the Buddha can be placed near them. Some traditions place a *mandala* blanket on the patient to act as a visual aid.

## Are there any rites that need to be performed?

There are no specific rituals that are required but there are a number of steps that can be undertaken in order to best prepare. If possible monks could be invited to the dying person's bedside. They will remind the dying person of past meritorious deeds and will chant verses or say prayers. A family member, friend or chaplain could also read verses from texts such as the *Mahamangala Sutta*, *Karaniyametta Sutta* and the *Ratana Sutta*. Those who follow Buddha Amitabha may chant his name as it is believed that the sound of the dharma positively influences the dying persons thought, which in turn affects their rebirth.



## Is there anything the dying person needs to do?

Again, there are no set rules, but the dying person might like to present gifts to the monastic community, such as food or the eight requisites. They should focus on previous meritorious action and maintaining a positive mental outlook.

## Can I give pain relief?

Providing physical comfort is considered to be important. This will reduce the suffering of the dying person, helping them to maintain positive thoughts. It is considered to be helpful if the person is conscious and coherent for as long as possible. Some Buddhists might refuse strong painkillers in order to achieve this.

# Moment of Death

## What is a good death for Buddhists?

A good death is calm and peaceful. The dying person would be reflecting on previous good deeds or having religious thoughts.

## When does death occur for Buddhists?

It is assumed that death occurs after the last breath has been taken. However, in some forms of Tibetan Buddhism after the last breath is taken the individual is in an intermediate state between their previous life and their new life. This state, known as the *bardo* can last up to 49 days.

## Does anything need to be done with the body after death?

It is traditional in some Buddhist societies to straighten the fingers and toes and bind them together after death has occurred. In some traditions body is laid out with the head facing west. In Tibetan practices the body should be left untouched for as long as possible. For Chinese Buddhists the body should be washed and dressed in a white funeral shroud.

## What if an autopsy is needed?

There are no teachings that forbid an autopsy to take place. In some forms of Buddhism, such as Tibetan, it is asked that it can be delayed for as long as possible with a suggested minimum of three and a half days. Organs can be donated, but this is often unpopular with East-Asian Buddhists as they try to disturb the body as little as possible.

## Can the body be embalmed?

In Theravada the body may be embalmed but this is not considered to be essential, however, in Tibetan Buddhism embalming should not take place.

## Are there any post-death rites that must be performed?

There are no specific rituals or last rites that need to be performed but there are certain acts that can be carried out after death to help the deceased to attain a good rebirth. Chanting texts, including *pirit*, will generate merit that can be transferred to the deceased. Expressions of grief should be made away from the body as in some traditions the

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faculty of hearing is the last sense left before death.

### **What rites can be carried out at a later time?**

#### **Chanting**

A request for the refuges and precepts can be made. This can be done in Pali, the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese or in English. There can be a homage paid to the Buddha, this would be repeated three times. There could be verses from Tibetan, Mahayana and Theravada literature depending upon the personal beliefs of the deceased.

#### **Eulogy and *Dhamma* Talk**

If there is a monk presiding over the funeral service then he can give a sermon and a eulogy outlining the good and meritorious deeds performed by the deceased in their life time.

### **Does the body have to be buried or cremated?**

Buddhists may opt to be buried or cremated. The choice being decided previously by the deceased or if it has not been discussed whatever the family is most comfortable with.

## **Other Rituals and Local Customs**

Depending on the form of Buddhism followed by the deceased there can be a number of rituals that can take place before or after the funeral takes place.



#### **Offering of cloth on behalf of the dead (*mataka-vastra-puja*)**

Before a funeral monks are offered a white cloth which is intended to be used to make monastic robes. During this ceremony, the following from the Mahaparinibbana Sutta is recited:<sup>1</sup>

Formations truly they are transient,  
It is their nature to arise and cease,  
Having arisen, then they pass away,  
Their calming and cessation—happiness.

Water is then poured into an overflowing cup to represent the transfer of merit whilst the following is

chanted:

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<sup>1</sup> The following verses have been translated for this document, or have been adapted from 'The Mirror of the Dhamma' which can be found at [www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh054.pdf](http://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh054.pdf)

Just as water rained on high ground moves [down] to the low land, even so does what is given here benefit the dead.

Just as the rivers full of water fill the ocean full, even so does what is given here benefit the dead.

## Ghost Month Rituals

### China

In China there are a number of rituals that are performed in memory of the dead during the course of the ghost month. During this period the 'spirits' of the dead are



invited to the Buddhist monasteries to participate. One of the most important aspects is the recitation of the name Amitabha or the scripture of the Bodhisattva Kshitigarbha. This generates merit which can then be transferred to the dead. Offerings of food and incense are made to the buddhas whilst lists of the dead are read by monks to ensure that they share in the merit. The climax of the Ghost Month rituals is the offering

of food and vast amounts of paper money to the hungry ghosts and the transfer of the resulting merit to the dead.

### Laos

In Laos there are two annual festivals for the deceased, both take place during the ninth lunar month (approx. October). The 'festival of rice packets decorating the earth' is held on the first day of the new moon, and the 'festival of baskets drawn by lot' takes place at full moon. Both rituals are occasions for caring for the dead by transferring food and merit to them. In the former the lay people leave packets of rice wrapped in banana leaves around the temple as offerings to ghosts and the dead. The second festival is an occasion for remembering ancestors. Laypeople prepare baskets filled with offerings, including food, plants and flowers, for the dead. A



A paper slip on the basket states who it is from and who it is intended for. The baskets are brought to the temple and assigned by lot to specific monks who then 'transfer' the baskets to the dead.



For Further information please visit:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/religion/buddhist-centre/projects/bdr/>