Buddhism, Chinese Funeral Rites and Theravāda Tradition in Malaysia[1]

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[Received: 27/02/2565 Revised: 06/07/2565 Accepted: 20/07/2565]

Abstract

In Chinese Malaysian Buddhist community when a person dies, funeral rites are performed to ensure the well-being of the deceased. On reflection some of these funeral rites are not common to Buddhist practices in part due to intermingle of philosophies of Daoism (*Dàojiào*), Confucianism (*Rújiā*), and Chinese traditional beliefs (*zhōnghuájiào*). It is a deeply rooted cultural and religious belief that only through such rituals can help the deceased achieve liberation from misery of death. It is arguable the observance of rites and rituals for the deceased through ignorance and fear not founded on moral or ethical values but instead on *míxìn* (superstition) are meaningless and wasteful. The rooted beliefs that only through such rituals can help the deceased achieve liberation from misery of death are incompatible to the central Theravāda Buddhist doctrines of *kamma*. The objective of this paper is to take due cognizance of some prevalent funeral rites which are incompatible to Buddhist teachings of nature of death and *kamma* with a view to causing reform to be affected so that whatever rites that are being carried out would be consonance with Buddhist religious principles. This paper investigates by scrutinizing some relevant section of texts in Pāli Canon on the significance of Buddhist's concept of merit and its direct consequence to the well-being of the deceased. The findings are expected to generate basic reappraisal of rites and rituals and bring about a sense of security in knowledge to Chinese Buddhists who wishes to perform a Theravadin Buddhist funeral. Therefore, a proper Buddhist funeral is about respect and gratitude for the deceased.

[1] This paper is based on the author's PhD dissertation at International Buddhist Studies College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU). It was first presented at the annual meeting in 2021 of Philosophy and Religion Society of Thailand (PARST).

Introduction

In Chinese Malaysian Buddhist community when a person dies, funeral rites are performed to ensure the well-being of the deceased. Some of these funeral rites and rituals have changed with time and some have not even though the premises on which they were based no longer apply. Goh Sang Seong notes some unique customs and taboos must be scrupulously observed:[2]

> "If death occurred at home, the idols at home must be covered with red paper and must not come into contact with the deceased or the coffin. Apart from that, all mirrors or reflective surfaces (such as television screen) at home must be covered as it is believed anyone who see the coffin's shadow in the mirror will bring death to his or her family. A white cloth will be hung on the front door to indicate the house is in mourning. As for deaths which occurred outside the house, the deceased will not be brought back home but taken to the funeral parlour prior to burial."

This paper argues against the observance of rites for the deceased through ignorance and fear, not founded on moral or ethical values but instead on *míxìn* (superstition) are meaningless and wasteful. Rituals not founded on moral or ethical values but instead on superstition can help the deceased achieve liberation from misery of death are incompatible to the central Theravāda Buddhist doctrines of *kamma*. The attempt is made with aim to shed some light on the subject so Buddhists may discard blind and slavish adherence to superstitions and taboos that are incompatible with the Buddha's teachings. As in most things, knowledge and understanding is the key to dropping unsuitable rites and rituals and adopting in their stead skillful and meaningful practices.

This paper asserts a priori assumption Chinese Malaysian Buddhists comprises followers of three major Buddhist sects Mahayana, Vajrayana and Theravāda and most of them are practicing the religion without a clear notion of Buddhism. Chinese Malaysian Buddhists follow beliefs about death and dying from intermingle philosophies of Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Chinese traditional beliefs.[3] According to Chinese cultures in relation to Daoism belief a deceased will be ushered by the black and white ghosts called *hēibái wúcháng* to the Ten courts of hell which is

[2] Sang Seong Goh, "Penang Chinese Customs and Traditions," *Kajian Malaysia* 33 (2015): 135-152.

[3] Chee Beng Tan, "Chinese Religion in Malaysia. Asian Folklore Studies," *Asian Folklore Studies* (1983): 217-252.

guarded by Ox-Head and Horse Face.[4] It is said the deceased will be presented in front of judge King Qin of the first court. In this stage the deceased's sins would be read out. If the deceased good deeds exceed the sins, he or she will be sent to the Golden bridge to reach paradise and awaiting their rebirth. A deceased with too many past sins will be severely punish and persecuted. In Chinese traditional belief, the concept of funeral rites is about helping the deceased to repent its sins and for judges to have mercy and pardon.

Chinese cultures emphasized the importance of maintaining the body intact for death ritual. Cremation is traditionally uncommon. The wish is to be buried intact. Dying with an incomplete body would be a curse and interferes with death ritual. It prevents one from resting in peace. Conversely improper funeral arrangements have direct consequences to the well-being of deceased afterlife and can wreak ill fortune and disaster upon the family of the deceased. This paper is critical that observance of funeral rites and rituals can help the deceased achieve liberation from misery of death is conflicting to the Buddhist scriptures. The Buddhist attitude towards ritual can be seen from its reference to *silabbata-paramasa* ("clinging to rules and rites"), an expression used to signify an attitude of over-dependence on ritual based on mere superstitions through confusion, ignorance and fear. Out of ignorance and fear, rituals are designed specifically for the benefit of the soul of the deceased to help the deceased achieve liberation from misery of death. Theravāda texts do not speak of funeral rites but merits accrued in lifetime has a direct consequence to the well-being of the deceased.

This paper investigates by scrutinizing some relevant section of texts in Pāli Canon on the significance of Buddhist's concept of merit and its direct consequence to the well-being of the deceased. The findings are expected to generate basic reappraisal of rites and rituals and bring about a sense of security in knowledge for Buddhists intend to perform a proper Buddhist funeral. In addition, findings in more recent studies showed that some of the traditional and cultural ideas, such as burying intact and filial piety, have become less influential suggesting generational differences and that younger individuals are potentially more informed about Buddhism.[5] Given that Chinese Malaysian cultures possess strong family values, it is suggested an extensive educational effort that focuses on improving awareness among younger individuals and

[4] Mu-Chou Poo, "*Ghosts in Early Daoist Culture. In Ghosts and Religious Life in Early China,"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 126-149.

[5] Miah T. Li, Grace C. Hillyer, S. Ali Husain, and Sumit Mohan. "Cultural barriers to organ donation among Chinese and Korean individuals in the United States: a systematic review." *Transplant International* 32, no. 10 (2019): 1001-1018.

encouraging them to initiate this discussion within the family may positively impact a proper Buddhist funeral rite.

1.1 Chinese Traditional beliefs, Rites and Practices for Funeral

The way of honoring the deceased as it is practiced by majority Chinese Malaysian Buddhists is a mixture of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. The majority Chinese Malaysians and they who called themselves as Buddhists perceive the way of honoring the deceased is a proper funeral must be carried out completely. Even if the funeral will cause the families of the deceased to go into some form of debt, the funeral must be carried out completely because people believe that only through rituals and chanting performed by medium can the deceased be guided onto the right path and into paradise. The soul is assured not left to wander around.[6]

In conjunction to this belief is that spirits of the deceased continue to remain on earth, and improper handling of the deceased will bring bad luck to the immediate family and the entire family clan.[7] A deceased is believed to play a role in a family's wealth, health, and success. Retribution relates to the current family or previous generation's negative experiences is commonly blamed on the family having been cursed by failing rituals for deceased.[8] The fear of losing what they possess, or the thought of fear that they will be harmed or will face "bad luck" have naturally brought families into contact with Tao Priest to perform funeral rituals to seek its cause, in order to avoid and remedy misfortunes or at the least to maintaining family's current wealth.[9]

No previous verifiable evidences linking to these beliefs had been found therefore it is arguable the observance of rites for the deceased are due to ignorance and fear not founded on moral or ethical values but instead on *míxìn* (superstition) are meaningless and wasteful. Despite lacking

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[6] Taoist Funeral Malaysia, http://funeralsmalaysia.com/en/services/taoist-funeral, accessed September 18, 2021.

[7] Alice G. Yick, and Rashmi Gupta, "Chinese cultural dimensions of death, dying, and bereavement: Focus group findings," *Journal of Cultural Diversity* 9, no. 2 (2002): 32-42.

[8] Soo See Yeo, Bettina Meiser, Kristine Barlow-Stewart, David Goldstein, Katherine Tucker, and Maurice Eisenbruch, "Understanding community beliefs of Chinese-Australians about cancer: initial insights using an ethnographic approach," *Psycho-Oncology: Journal of the Psychological, Social and Behavioral Dimensions of Cancer* 14, no. 3 (2005): 174-186.

[9] T. F. Kleeman, "Taoism," in R. Kastenbaum (Ed.), Macmillan encyclopedia of death and dying, Volume 2 (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2003), 873–875.

of empirical verification, some Chinese Malaysian Buddhist families continue to observe funeral rites without questioning them. They had inherited these traditional beliefs from their ancestors who were migrants from Fujian and Guangdong provinces attracted by the prospect of work in the tin mines, rubber plantations and the possibility of opening up new farmlands at the beginning of the 19th century until the 1930s in British Malaya.[10] When Chinese migrants first immigrated to Malaya, worship was to generate good fortune because of the miserable working conditions in their new land.

Migrants adhered to rites and rituals that could offer immediate assistance and psychological appeasement. Hence Chinese Buddhists' monks and nuns at the time helped "mainly with chanting and performing ritual" rather than with other transcendental concerns. This practice has continued until the present day.[11] Venerable Suvanno[12] a senior Theravadin Buddhist monk and teacher cites examples of prevailing Chinese funeral rites are to place a bowl of rice with chopstick in front of the casket, to place a basin of water and towel under the casket, burning of paper houses, paper cars, "hell" money, and other paper paraphernalia, to distribute red threads to those who attend the funeral, to wash one's face with "chanted" water at the end of funeral to ward of bad luck. According to Venerable Suvanno Chinese Buddhist who wishes to hold a purely Theravadin Buddhist funeral, should discard many of these rites and superstitious practices.

What is criticized of the prevailing practice not only the observance of rites due to ignorant not founded on moral or ethical values but instead on *míxìn* (superstition) are meaningless and wasteful but also observance of rites for the deceased through fear of not meeting parents' filial expectations. Filial piety is based on a teaching of Confucius (Kǒngzǐ 551-479 B.C.), a Chinese preeminent philosopher, social thinker, political theorist, and educator.[13] Confucian ethics does not regard filial piety as a choice, but rather as an unconditional obligation of the child.

[10] Linda Y.C Lim and L.A Peter Gosling, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 1. (Singapore: Maruzen Asia, 1983), p. 284.

[11] Tan Lee Ooi, *Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 27.

[12] Venerable Suvanno, "How a Theravadin Buddhist Chinese Funeral May be Conducted" (Malaysia: Sukhihotu Sdn Bhd, 1996), pp. 11-13.

[13] M. Csikszentmihalyi, "Confucianism: An overview," In L. Jones (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of religion*, 2nd ed., Vol. 3 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2005), pp. 1890–1905.

Psychologist David Yau-fai Ho states[14] that "rebellion or outright defiance" is never approved in Confucian ethics.

In the Confucian text Book of Rites,[15] respect is envisioned by detailed manners such as the way children respect their parents, speak to them (words and tone used), care for parents making sure parents is comfortable in every single way: this involves food, accommodation, clothes, hygiene, and basically to have them live without worry. But the most important expressions of, and exercises in, filial piety were the burial and mourning rituals to be held in honor of one's parents, to display sorrow for their sickness and death; and to bury them and carry out sacrifices after their death. They understand filial piety consists of physical care, love, service, respect, and absolute obedience.

Ho found, that in Chinese parent–child relations, fear was a contributing factor in meeting parents' filial expectations: children may not internalize their parents' expectations, but rather perform roles as good children in a detached way, through affect–role dissociation. In the Confucian text Book of Rites, the most important expressions of, and exercises in, filial piety were the burial and mourning rituals to be held in honor of one's parents, to display sorrow for their sickness and death; and to bury them and carry out sacrifices after their death. The notion of filial piety has a far-reaching effect in Malaysian Chinese families.

1.2 Buddhist Modernism, Theravāda Temple and Buddhist School

The burial of the deceased is a matter taken very seriously by a great majority of Malaysian Chinese families. The older generations cling strongly to their superstitions and beliefs in funeral rites resulting from a lack of information and proper understanding of Buddhism. The early Mahayana Buddhism was the popular form of Buddhism as practiced during colonial times. The early Mahayana Buddhism was inseparable from Chinese religions and it was treated as Chinese religions without clear notion of Buddhism as a religion. According to Tan Lee Ooi,[16] there was an awareness for a more organized religion through exchanges of new ideas of Buddhism from historically and contemporarily connected regional ties by late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The reorientation of Buddhism from merely for personal gain praying to emphasize the

[14] D. Y. F. Ho, "Filial Piety, Authoritarian Moralism and Cognitive Conservatism in Chinese Societies," Genetic *Social and General Psychology Monographs* 120, no. 3 (1994): 349–365.

[15] Chatuwit Keawsuwan, "The Study of the Concept of Filial Piety in Confucianism through the Four Books," *Manutsayasat Wichakan* 28, no. 1 (2021): 255-287.

[16] Tan Lee Ooi, *Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia,* p.44.

rational learning of dhamma in life is orchestrated by the transnational as well as local religious leaders.

Tan Lee Ooi postulates there are at least two important trajectories of Buddhist modernism in Malaya and later Malaysia. They are the Theravada traditions from Thailand and Sri Lanka, and the Mahayana tradition from China. Buddhist countries under colonialism such as Burma and Sri Lanka, Buddhism had "been forced to undergo a major transformation." In Thailand the recompilation of the Tripitaka and the subsequent reorganization of Sangha by King Mongkut (Rama IV) have impacted the modernization of Buddhism in Thai. The coming abbot directly from Thailand, Sri Lanka and Myanmar to newly established temples in Peninsular Malaya had been trained under the modernization project in their respective countries. As a result, they brought along the idea of Buddhist modernism to Malaya.

The Chinese have built many temples throughout Malaya. Many were a mixture of Taoist temples rather than Buddhist temples but they were all regarded as Chinese temples. According to H.M. A de Silva there were then no Theravāda Buddhist temples and no monks.[17] The landscape gradually transformed by mid-eighteenth century. Tan Lee Ooi elucidates[18] on the Theravada side, the first Burmese Buddhist temple in Malaya was built in 1803, the Dhammikarama Buddhist temple in Penang. The Thai built the first Thai Buddhist temple in 1845, Wat Chaiyamangalaram on land donated by the British Government to the Thai people in the interest of commerce in Penang.[19] The Sri Lankan build the first temple in 1885, Taiping BodiLangkaram in Perak. This was followed by the Brickfields Buddhist Temple in 1894 - now known as Buddhist Maha Vihara Brickfields, Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple Sentul in 1917 and the Mahindarama Buddhist Temple Penang in 1918.

Some monks who could speak Chinese would spread Theravāda Buddhism to Chinese religion followers who went to Thai or Sri Lanka temple to seek religious services. Nonetheless, with the linguistics constraint and limited resources, the influence might not be far reaching. The turning point came when the young and educated were attracted to the beauty of the Buddha Dhamma

[17] H.M.A de Silva, *100 Years of The Buddhist Maha Vihara (1895-1995)* (Malaysia: Sasana Abhiwurdhi Wardhana Society, 1998), p. 23.

[18] Tan Lee Ooi, *Buddhist Revitalization and Chinese Religions in Malaysia,* 32-4.

[19] K. Don Premaseri, Buddhism in Malaysia, http://asc.mcu.ac.th/database/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Buddhism-in-Malaysia-by-Bro-K-DonPremseri.pdf, accessed October 17, 2021.

which the Venerable K Sri Dhammananda[20] had so expertly propounded by means that would not conflict with the old-age customs and the ways of life current to Chinese community. As stated earlier many Chinese Buddhists do not simply practice Buddhism, they also maintain traditional Chinese beliefs and ancestor worship. The coming of Buddhist leaders especially K. Sri Dhammananda from Sri Lanka had successfully promoted Buddhist education, developed Buddhist societies, and has had close linkages with students in major public universities, colleges, and secondary schools. Buddhist education in Malaysia changed significantly with the introduction of informal Buddhist education in a dhamma class and the set- up of the Institute Sunday Dhamma School (BISDS).

The first BISDS was established as a Religious School in 1929 under the tutelage of Ven. M. Dhammadassi Thera, the incumbent bhikkhu of the Brickfields Buddhist Temple.[21] The emphasis was squarely put on the simultaneous need for both preservation of the traditional, canonical text–based Buddhist learning and exposure to the modern curriculum subjects like History of Buddhism, and English. It is believed that Buddhist Sunday Schools are much appreciated by all Buddhists and considerably helps improve public understanding of Buddhist values and practices. Buddhism, previously a rarely pursuit by the Chinese families began to grow into a popular force among the young, college-educated. Modern Buddhism have contributed to the emergence of a new world view that was “very different” from that of the past that was based “in traditional rituals and traditional religious education.”

This new religious world view shifted “from practice centered on communal rituals” to self-cultivation. The benefit received from Buddhist education have made the new generation competent enough to object following certain traditional beliefs and practices as these are not Buddhist practice and there is no efficacy in it. What is being criticized is the observance of meaningless and wasteful rites and rituals, which are founded not on moral or ethical values but instead on utter superstition. There is awareness of the opposing traditional view that upholds funeral rite has a direct consequence to well-being of the deceased. Such a deeply rooted belief that only through such rituals can help the deceased achieve liberation from misery of death contradicts the Buddhist scriptures.

[20] That turning point came on 2 January, 1952 with the arrival of Ven. Dhammananda to the Maha Vihara Temple.

[21] Lochan Amarjiva, Buddhist Education in Southeast Asia: Crisis and Remedies, http://www.undv2019 vietnam.com/Main-Theme/en/37.pdf, accessed September 16, 2021.

Followers believe the more elaborate and complex the rituals, the higher the honor to the deceased. Also, a smooth passage for rebirth is assured. From Theravada Buddhist perspective, such rites contradict its scriptures. In what way do those rites contradict the Buddhist teaching? This paper attempts to answer these questions in two parts. Part 1 of the paper investigates scriptural and prevalent perceptions of honoring the deceased. Part 2 of the paper suggests procedures to honor the deceased based on the conclusions reached in Part 1.

2. The direct consequence of meritorious deeds

The Theravada answer merits accrued in lifetime are a direct consequence to the well-being of the deceased is based on its doctrine of four-fold *kamma*, explicitly stated in *AbhidhammatthaSaṅgaha.*[22] One such example is found in the "the Greater Exposition of *Kamma"* (*Mahàkammavibhaṅga Sutta*, MN 136) where the Buddha explained the workings of *kamma*. Four scenarios were given by the Buddha in that *sutta*, hinting at the complexities of possibilities and probabilities that surround the ripening of *kamma*: A person performs a good act and subsequently has a good rebirth; another also performs a good act but has a bad rebirth.

The same two outcomes can follow a bad act. Why and how does that happen? The sutta explanation because before or after that particular act, something else is done that has the opposite effect and it is this other act that results in the subsequent rebirth; or a certain view is undertaken and completed at the time of death, and this determines the well-being of the dead, resulting in a good rebirth. The teaching of *kamma* asserts the position of man as his own master of destiny and not dependent on expiation or appeasement to external forces god, deities and supernatural beings to save him from bad luck or misfortune.

A person can be confident his good *kamma* will give bring positive good result for his well-being after dead if he performed many *kusala* (wholesome actions) and abstain from *akusala* (unwholesome actions) that causes one to go to *niraya* after death. Hence, a Buddhist does not need funeral rites and rituals after death to go to heaven. Nowhere in the Theravāda text states that funeral rites and rituals has direct consequence to the well-being of the deceased. Further emphasis in the text states what happens to the mind just prior to death can in some way influence the well-being of the deceased. It is clear the concept of *kamma* is extended even at deathbed.

[22] MN 136. PTS: M iii 207

The Theravada texts states *kamma* can be changed to “accrued” which can be either *kusala* or *akusala* in three ways, bodily, verbally and mentally. The commentaries explain to die in an angry frame of mind might even for very virtuous people result in rebirth as *peta* or in another low or unpleasant existence. One example for this case was King Asoka, who was allegedly born as a snake due to anger (*kēntiya*) arising at the moment of death, but was again reborn in a *devalokaya* after only seven days due to his generally good *kamma* - merit accrued in his lifetime.

The rationale of the concept of merits accrued in lifetime is of a direct consequence to well-being of the deceased has effectively shifted the perception of many people and help them remove their attachment to funeral rites and superstitions. Although *Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*, the compendium of higher Dhamma is attributed to a monk named Venerable Anuruddha in the 10th century, this four-fold classification of *kamma* is by no means a baseless invention, but a neat and structured summary of the Buddha's teachings how bad and good *kamma* are created practically through our mind responds to the six sense objects at any time depends on conditioning.

Any intentional response constitutes *kamma*, which is directly responsible for generating rebirth. Since we are intentionally responding to the senses practically every wakeful moment, good and bad *kamma* is continuously being created. So, what can we do to ensure when we are on the threshold of death according to Theravada text is to respond in a wholesome way to whatever appears in our awareness. Therefore, by creating good wholesome *kamma “kusala kamma”* we can be assured of our well-being after death.

To appreciate the Theravāda perspective of *kamma* and rebirth, we must first understand the quartet of *kamma*: 1. By way of function 2. By way of ripening 3. By time of ripening 4. By place of ripening. As the *kamma* we have created in the course of life is extremely varied, which particular type of *kamma* takes priority over others in determining rebirth?

According to the second quartet, this *kammic* influence is not random but follows a certain order. In the ripening order of *kamma*, when dying the weighty *kamma* gets foremost priority in producing rebirth, followed by near-death *kamma*, habitual *kamma* and reserve *kamma*. Putting aside weighty *kamma*, the predominance of any of the other three types of *kamma* at the proximity of death depends very much on chance. We can take steps to increase the chances of a favourable type of *kamma* prevailing just before death, but there can be no certainty that our efforts will bring the desired result.

Henceforth our deeply rooted belief that through rituals are "*kammic* booster" to help the deceased achieve liberation from misery of death does not appear to sync with Theravāda doctrine. If we deeply appreciate and internalize the understanding that our conduct at any time can produces effect, we can take the right steps more often. Practically, this simply means: try to live a morally upright and spiritually fulfilling life as much as possible while engaged in the pursuit of material gain and intellectual advancement. According to Keown, actions in Buddhism are not, as utilitarianism claims, good or evil because they lead to good or evil consequences. Rather, actions generate good or evil consequences because they are intrinsically good or evil.[23]

However, a niggling ethical and philosophical issues pertaining to concept of *kamma and rebirth* have continually placed next of kins of deceased in quandary. Filial children are fearsome of *kammic* retribution against parental's death wish. They understand according to the traditional texts, filial piety consists of physical care, love, service, respect, and obedience. As children they should attempt not to bring disgrace upon their parents.

Similar questions concerning philosophical issues have been raised by Professor Frank J. Hoffman in his book, *Rationality and the Mind in Early Buddhism* which he raised two problems:[24]

[If it is not the same soul substance across lives at T, and T, then in what way is one justified in regarding the consciousness at T, as that of the same person? And if it is not the same person, then what sense does it make to ascribe moral responsibility for actions performed by another?]

Frank Hoffman's standpoint[25] on these issues in Chapter 5, page 93 is that "there is an ambiguity in the expression 'rebirth doctrine'. If taken as view in the sense of picture, in full recognition of there being no propositional sense here, then of course Buddhists have a 'doctrine'. But if taken as a theory to be defended with argument, in view of the condemnation of *ditthi* as speculative view, there is no early Buddhist doctrine in that sense.

It is well known that theories of the relation between soul and body were set aside, as well as speculation on the state of the *Tathāgata*. This shows the unwillingness to become 'entangled' in a specific philosophical theory of rebirth." Buddhist standpoint in helping the dying who is skeptic or have little faith in the Buddha *sasana* rightly should be sensitive and not "pushy," otherwise

[23] Abraham Velez de Cea, "The criteria of goodness in the Pali Nikayas and the nature of Buddhist ethics," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11 (2004): 122-142

[24] Hoffman Frank J, *Rationality and the Mind in Early Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 60 -75.

[25] Hoffman, *Rationality and the Mind in Early Buddhism*, 64.

the person could become negative as this may give rise to confusion in the mind of the dying person.

The justification for *kamma* and rebirth doctrines should be avoided when death occurs and, in those circumstances, a true Buddhist should be mindful that such speculation on things unrelated to the elimination of craving (*tanha*), and the destruction of *raga*, dosa, and *moha* or passion, hatred, and confusion, is counterproductive. Right attitude is crucial in maintaining harmony and avoid deepening further disputes among disagreeing parties in families concerning the funeral rites.

2. A Proper Funeral in Theravāda Tradition

The Buddhist concept of non-self and *kamma* is strictly Buddhistic on the understanding that upon death what is left is only matter and how the remains are treated is normally of no direct consequence to the well-being of the deceased. This, however, does not mean that in a Buddhist funeral one can act disrespectfully towards the bodily remains of those who had showered their love on us. As an act of gratitude and respect, Buddhist should perform meaningful rites such as carrying out meritorious deeds in their memory.

Though the Buddha did not lay down rules on proper rites of passage for the laity, neither did he specifically prohibit his lay disciples, who are still very much attached to worldly possessions, from outwardly expressing their respect and gratitude, especially in times of death and separation. As an expression of bereavement and filial piety, a Buddhist funeral should be simple, solemn and dignified. It is not necessary to spend lavishly on meaningless traditional ceremonies. The previous paragraphs explained rites and rituals that contradict the Buddhist teachings should be abandoned. Instead, the money allocated for such purpose could be wisely donated to worthy causes such as to charity in the name of the deceased.

The hall or the place where the body lies for the wake should appear serene and peaceful. Be practical when choosing the casket. It need not be expensive and beyond one's means. An altar can be set up in front of the casket and the deceased portrait placed before it. On the altar can be placed offerings such as flowers, fruits, candles and incense. Bouquets, wreaths and banners given by friends and relatives can also be displayed modestly in the funeral hall.

Rita Langer based her observation of contemporary Sri Lankan practice and informs us that it is customary for family to invite monk to visit, console and remind the dying person of his/her

meritorious deeds performed in lifetime.[26] In retrospect the laypeople mentioned that it might actually be counterproductive to call a monk to the deathbed. It would make the dying person realize that his death was near and cause agitation rather than calm.

In that case, family members may reassure the dying person that he need not worry about them, that he should keep his mind calm and peaceful, and that it is all right to go when his time has come. She also mentions the custom of placing a Buddha image or a tray with flowers near the dying person as a visual aid to remember meritorious deeds in the hour of death. If the dying person had been practicing meditation, remind him of the importance of mindfulness.

Encourage him to constantly note the arising and falling of events. *Dhamma* friends who are meditation practitioners can be invited to radiate *metta* (loving-kindness) to ease the suffering of the sick person. In their absence family members too, can do themselves to radiate *metta* to the dying person. 'May you be well and happy, may you be free from suffering, may you be in good health, may you be at peace.' Feel the peaceful compassion from the mind envelops and penetrate that dying. Feel the vibrations that come with the compassion, enveloping the dying person's body.

Conclusion

The Buddhist attitude towards ritual can be seen from its reference to *silabbata-paramasa* "clinging to rules and rites", an expression used to signify an attitude of over-dependence on ritual which, from the Buddhist perspective, was considered a hindrance to genuine spiritual upliftment of the individual. Since Buddhism is a way of life, its concern is more with moral conduct and the quest for enlightenment. The only mention of regulated rite and ritual is in the *Vinaya* and that, too, is solely for the discipline of its monks.

It is explicit in the Theravada text, rites and rituals are not integral tenets of Buddhism. What is accountable for well-being in this present life and after death is *kamma.* It is the term for "action" and is either wholesome (*kusala kamma*) in the sense of conducive to enlightenment or unwholesome (*akusala kamma*) in the sense of conducive to further rebirths and unpleasant ones]. *Kamma* (action, intentional action) is the principle that underpins merits accrued in lifetime is of a direct consequence to the well-being of the dead.

[26] Langer Rita, *Buddhist rituals of death and rebirth: Contemporary Sri Lankan Practice and its Origins* (Routledge, 2007), p.10.

This however does not mean we can act disrespectful to the bodily remains of the deceased. Though the Buddha did not lay down rules on proper rites of passage for the laity, neither did he specifically prohibit his lay disciples, who are still very much attached to worldly possessions, from outwardly expressing their respect and gratitude, especially in times of death and separation. It is clear that Theravāda texts do not mention any special near-death rituals or customs in Buddhist funeral except some descriptive burial procedures for the Buddha in the *Māhaparinibbāna sutta.*

The general concept of a proper Buddhist funeral is providing physical comfort, to help someone who is dying to have a positive, peaceful mind. That means being free of disturbing emotions such as fear, anger, attachment, and depression. The dying person should be made to accept death as a natural and inevitable phenomenon, reflecting that all of us come according to our *kamma* (deeds) and we have to go according to our *kamma*.

He should constantly be made to reflect on the good deeds that he has done, and be reassured that these wholesome deeds of his would lead him to good rebirth and support him in his next life. Family members may reassure the dying person that he need not worry about them, that he should keep his mind calm and peaceful, and that it is all right to go when his time has come. *Cuti-vinnana*, or consciousness at the moment of death, is considered especially important for the type of rebirth realm that occurs**.** Therefore, it is clear a proper Buddhist funeral rite is an outward expression of respect and gratitude for the dead and is of no direct consequence to the well-being of the dead.

Transliterations

This article uses Pāli in Roman script transliteration from the Pāli Text Society. A few words are left untranslated because they are common, example *kamma* and *sutta*. The Pāli texts and its corresponding English translation are on the same page. The standard pinyin system are used in romanization of all Mandarin text except for personal names that have a well-known romanization. Example Daoism (*Dàojiào*) is used instead of Taoism (*Tao-chiao*).

Other Terms used

Confucianism – *Rújiā*

Chinese traditional beliefs - *zhōnghuájiào*

Superstition - *Míxìn*

Black and white ghost - *Hēibái wúcháng*

Confucious - *Kǒngzǐ*

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