

THE BUDDHIST WAY
by
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Duties of Parents in the Upbringing of their Children

The birth of a child is a happy event. Having a baby and bringing him up is an adventure that can be embarked upon happily and with confidence. At the same time it means the beginning of a long period of sacrifice and responsibility for the parents. Even though human beings are far advanced on the evolutionary ladder, their young normally take a long time to mature and become independent. Parents have the onerous duty of bearing the responsibility of caring for their children and nurturing them to become useful adults of the future. However over the centuries, societies have developed certain well-tested formulae to guide parents in this task of child rearing. In this connection religion plays a central role in providing parents with a framework within which to train the young in ethics, behaviour and morality. In Buddhism, the Buddha has given very useful advice on the duties of parents towards their children and vice versa. The **SIGALOVADA SUTRA** is perhaps the best known of these valuable injunctions. The Buddha related an incident of how he had once noticed a young man performing a simple ritual of bowing to the six directions (north, south, east, west, zenith and nadir). Upon being questioned as to the meaning and intent of his action, the young man replied that he did not know the significance of his performance but that he was merely following his late father's advice. Characteristically, the Buddha did not condemn the young man for performing such a ritual, but gave it a useful meaning by a practical interpretation. He said that the act of paying respects to the six directions significance honouring and fulfilling one's duties and obligations to one's parents, teachers, religious personalities, one's wife, children and employees. Thus, we see that the Buddha laid great emphasis on a person's relationship with others, but more especially so between parents and children. Parents must care for their children, by allowing them their independence when the time is right and by giving them their rightful inheritance in due course. On the other hand, children on their part are duty-bound to care for their parents by extending to them filial devotion. This is done out of mutual respect and gratitude towards them and not out of expectation of any reward in return. It is indicated here that there is a close link between religion and parent-children relationship. Parents should not fail to underscore the religious significance of the birth of a child. A family that develops its relationship along sensible established religious lines cannot go wrong.

Parents are duty-bound to develop such a relationship based on their religious cultural heritage. Whilst other religionists have their formal and obligatory baptisms and christenings to perform, Buddhist parents need only bring their children to the temple so as to re-affirm their faith in the Triple Gem and to seek refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Having sought refuge in the Triple Gem parents themselves may be endowed with the confidence in the up-bringing of their children with the firm assurance that they are being protected from all evil. We cannot deny the existence of evil forces around us which are malevolent towards human beings and which could cause harm. Bringing a child to the temple, and having sacred traditional religious services performed in his favour would definitely contribute to the well-being of the child. This could also be considered as the initial step in associating the child with the temple which if continued from a very tender age, could become part and parcel of his life. This habit if maintained up to adult life would serve the person in good stead when confronted with problems.

Blessing Services for Children

The reciting of Sutras imparts very beneficial effects on a child. It was reported that during the Buddha's time, when a child who was in a critical condition due to external evil influence was brought before him, the Buddha instructed that the Sutras be recited by an assembly of monks. The resultant effect was that the child averted death and lived to a ripe old age. In fact he was called **AYUWADDHANA** meaning "long life" because he was no longer in danger of a premature death.

Why do we go to the Buddha for Refuge?

When those who believe in a god experience fear, sorrow or any disturbance they pray for help and protection. Many Buddhists ask whom they can turn to when they are confronted with insecurity. In such circumstances Buddhists can recall the Buddha to their mind and seek solace. There is no doubt that the Buddhist concept of god is different from that in other religions but when they contemplate the supreme qualities of Buddha, his great victories, and his calm and noble characteristics, their minds will be calmed and they will gain confidence. Even many other religionists say god is not a person, but a force which is personalized in the mind. When their minds are calmed and strengthened by focusing on this power, they are in a position to face disturbances to evaluate the problems and find the means to overcome them. Buddhists can overcome their problems in a similar manner by recalling the image of the Buddha. Naturally many of our problems are caused by the mind and mind alone is able to solve them through understanding and confidence. That is why the knowledge of the Dharma is important. When the mind is strengthened through inspiration and devotion towards the Buddha it can overcome the sense of helplessness and fear of evil spirits, of being left alone, and confidence is regained. This is what is meant by going for refuge to the Buddha.

Whilst seeking refuge for the child at the temple, offerings of flowers, incense, candles or fruits may be made at the shrine room and the resident monks invited to recite sutras for the blessing of the infant. If so desired, the advice of the monks may also be sought for a suitable Buddhist name to be given to the child.

As the child grows up, it is the responsibility of parents to bring the child regularly to the temple to enable him to associate with religious-minded people and to listen to simple religious discourses and sermons and derive benefit therefrom. In the course of time the child will get used to performing Buddhist practices and will feel comfortable amidst the serene atmosphere in the temple surroundings. Of course children should also be brought to the temple for special blessing services on important occasions like their first day at school, examinations, birthdays and other happy events. When children get used to listening to the sutras, they acquire immense confidence in themselves because they know that through the beneficial influence of the sutras, they are being protected. They therefore tend to perform better in whatever undertaking they set out to do, and as a result are less nervous, feel more secure and will no longer have the dread of being left utterly helpless.

Buddhist Education and Cultural Practices

An effective way to introduce religious lessons for the young on morality and ethics is by using pictures, illustrations, religious symbols and by giving interesting talks on Buddhist legends and stories. This method may appeal to many people, especially the young and it can help them to appreciate Buddhism much better. Certain stage performances or

sketches depicting historical Buddhist legendary events can also help to create a good and lasting impression on the young minds.

To lead children on the right path, parents themselves should first set the example and lead ideal lives. It is impossible to expect worthy children from unworthy parents. Apart from Kammic tendencies, children are influenced by the defects and virtues of parents too. Responsible parents should take precaution not to transmit negative traits to their children.

The Buddha's advice regarding traditions and customs was neither to accept nor to reject anything without first considering whether such practices are meaningful and useful. Less emphasis is placed on these methods once a person has learned the Dhamma to lead a meaningful Buddhist life. The Buddha says that whatever methods we use to train the mind, our attitude should be like a man who used a raft to get across a river. After having crossed the river, he did not cling on to the raft, but left it on the river bank to continue his journey. Similarly, cultural practices should be regarded merely as an aid to gain inspiration and not as an end in themselves.

Buddhist cultural practices vary from country to country. When performing these traditional practices, we must be careful not to categorise Buddhism as belonging to any one of them. For example, we should not think in terms of Chinese Buddhism, Sinhalese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism. This only creates disharmony, discrimination and misunderstanding. We should also be aware of certain so-called Buddhist leaders who try to reinforce their own Buddhist labels by incorporating many forms of charms, divine powers, mystical and supernatural practices and concepts to hoodwink the masses. Such unscrupulous actions are done with a total disregard to what the Buddha has said about such practices.

Another common practice among Buddhists is to hold blessing services in their new homes. Whenever people move into new dwelling houses, or when shifting house from one locality to another, it is the general custom among Buddhists to invite monks to perform blessing services so as to ensure that the place will be well protected spiritually as well as be a peaceful abode for all who dwell in it where happiness, peace and harmony will pervade. Similarly, such blessing services could also be performed when occupying new business premises, or whenever a new business is launched.

MARRIAGE

According to the Buddha, as a child grows into adulthood, it is also the duty of parents to find a suitable spouse for their offspring. Of course this is not the custom nowadays in modern society, but nevertheless parents can be supportive when their children begin to look for suitable mates for themselves. This would be the best opportunity to help them not only materially but also in the form of offering discreet advice and guidance in the choice of suitable partners, so as to avoid pitfalls in life. If the children had been coming to the temple regularly, the chances are that they would have had the opportunity to associate with other Buddhist youths who share with them the same religious values and interests and who would invariably make good marriage partners.

It has been noticed that many Buddhists in this country tend to forget their spiritual obligations when it comes to the most important and auspicious occasion of their lives – their marriage. It is customary in Buddhist countries for engaged couples to invite monks to their homes for a blessing service. This could be performed either before or

after the wedding which normally takes place at the Registry of Marriages or at the homes of the parties concerned. It is hoped that all Buddhist couples would fulfill their obligations in this manner when they get married. Simple offerings of flowers, incense and candles are all that are required for the short blessing service to which the parents of both parties together with their relatives and friends could be invited to participate. Such blessing service, given on the auspicious day, would be a definite spiritual contribution to the success, peace, harmony and happiness of the newlyweds.

Infatuation alone is not a sufficient basis for a successful marriage; hence young people should well be advised to be sure of the spiritual side of their affair before taking the final vows. When a couple embarks on marriage by observing religious tenets, they are bound to have greater respect for the institution of marriage and they will naturally turn to religion in times of stress for solace. After having been happily married the young couple should themselves strive to become good and responsible Buddhist parents to their own children of the future.

RELIGIOUS RITES

Although religious rites, rituals and ceremonies are not favoured by intellectuals, such practices are nevertheless important for developing and maintaining the devotional aspects of a religion and for creating a sense of aspiration among the masses. For many people, cultivating devotion is the first important step towards the experience of a religion. If there is no devotional and cultural aspects attached to Buddhism, people may be drawn to some other kind of beliefs or practices, even though they are aware that such practices are steeped in superstition or blind faith.

It is important for religions to have some harmless rituals and reasonable practices for people to express their devotion and spiritual feelings. Many of the Buddhist ceremonies help to cultivate good habits and positive emotions amongst the followers who consequently become more tolerant, considerate and cultured people. When performed with understanding and earnestness, these traditional practices tend to strengthen one's beliefs as against a mere intellectual approach. Buddhism without any devotion would be rather cold, detached and academic.

TABOOS

Most races have their own taboos. In Malaysia perhaps we have more than our fair share of them because the three major ethnic groups have their own animistic beliefs and each is influenced by the others. Because of ignorance, fear and superstition each group tends to accept the beliefs of others rather than studying them rationally and discarding them as being irrelevant to modern society. For example many Asian communities believe that they must not clip their finger nails after dark nor wash their hair on certain days of the week. Some people think that it is bad luck to see shaven headed religious men the first thing in the morning whilst others will not sweep their houses after dark. It is even believed to be bad to carry meat around at night for fear that it might attract evil spirits. Some parents advise their children to carry a piece of metal to protect themselves from ghosts. Then there are those who believe that howling dogs and hooting owls at night could bring bad luck and that a twitching of the left eye is a bad omen. Some people consider these as very serious issues. But those who ignore them are free from fear and disturbances.

What is the Buddhist attitude towards such beliefs? Where does rational thinking end

and superstition begin? They all seem to originate in our fear of the unknown. Sometimes there are practical reasons for observing certain beliefs. For example it is of course inadvisable to cut one's fingernails in the dark simply because one could cut one's finger in the process. As far as evil spirits are concerned the Buddha has said that so long as we practise loving-kindness towards all beings, visible and invisible, so long as we do others no harm by living sensibly and believing in the power of the Dhamma or the Truth as expounded by the Buddha, and so long as we develop our right understanding by studying his Teachings, nothing can harm us. This again means we have to develop our religious devotion and confidence by visiting the temple regularly, and by having useful discussions with religious teachers so as to enrich our understanding of the Dhamma. The temple must be a place where people can gain more knowledge and understanding to get rid of superstitious beliefs and to eradicate undue fear in the minds of innocent people.

CHARMS AND BLACK MAGIC

It is common practice among many Asian communities to think that they are the victims of black magic and charms whenever they face some unhappy experiences in their lives. At the slightest indication that something unpleasant has happened they would often run off to consult seers, astrologers, mediums and 'bomohs'. Of course the livelihood of these vendors of magic and charms depends on telling their customers that something is wrong or that some evil forces have been employed by someone to bring about their family misfortune. They then claim to be able to counteract these evil forces and charge large sums of money by promising to 'cure' them. More often than not the only effect is that these unsuspecting victims end up becoming lighter in their pocket and as a result are none the wiser for their experience. Popular Buddhism has not been spared by the antics of these quacks and charlatans, some of whom even going to the extent of masquerading themselves as monks to make a fast dollar from their unsuspecting victims. But the Buddha has declared in no uncertain terms that many of our misfortunes are essentially created by the untrained impure minds and it is only through our own efforts and understanding that we will be able to overcome them.

In this country particularly there are a great many such beliefs. This may be because the three major races have their own peculiar beliefs, and a great deal of interchange had taken place so much so that there had developed a tremendously varied set of beliefs which are uniquely Malaysian.

The Buddhist cure for misfortune of any kind is as scientific as the methods of modern psychiatry. It is summarized in the Second Noble Truth – The Cause of Suffering. Before we can look for a cure to misfortune (**ill luck, bad health, loss of someone or something personal and family problems**) we must get to the root of it. We must examine rationally what actually is happening and understand that only we alone can overcome the misfortune. Concentration certainly will strengthen the mind to understand the cause of the problems in order to find a solution. In the case of sickness, a calm mind helps to effect a cure faster. By merely appealing to the Supernatural to overcome misfortune is not the proper solution to end suffering. We must reflect calmly that misfortune is the lot of anyone who is born into this world and that what happens to us must be looked at rationally so that a reasonable solution could be found. This is not fatalistic – it shows that each individual, using the Right Effort can rid himself of misfortune.

IMAGES, HOLY WATER, HOLY THREAD, TALISMANS AND AMULETS

Society in general is better educated now than it has ever been in the past, but in spite of vast advances achieved in the field of scientific knowledge, many people still suffer from fear, suspicion and insecurity. The root cause of these states of mind stems from ignorance, uncertainty and craving. Because of our ignorance of the non-existence of a permanent self, we believe in our ego and this belief gives rise to craving. We are filled with insatiable desires and fear of losing that which we possess. We fear that we will be harmed or that we will face 'bad luck'. So what do we do? We turn instinctively to our animistic past and depend on special talismans and amulets to protect us. The Buddha has clearly stated that external objects are not strong enough to protect those whose minds are weak and confused. Our only security is to take refuge in our knowledge of the truth and in our realization of the true nature of the self and other phenomena. Once we understand that there is no reality in a self that can be harmed, we become secure and confident. No harm can come to him who is unafraid, unselfish or undeluded.

However, it does not mean that Buddhism condemns the use of certain religious objects like a pendant of the Buddha image to give us a sense of security. Many great men had found solace and comfort by contemplating on the serene and calm image of the Buddha. The first Prime Minister of India, Mr. Nehru said that when he was imprisoned by the British his only source of comfort was a tiny Buddha image which he had with him. Of course the image itself had no magical power. But what it symbolized was the great qualities of the Buddha who had himself remained calm and unaffected by the attacks made against him by his enemies and it was this symbol that reminded Nehru of his own strength with which he could face adversity calmly. We too can carry images of the Buddha or inscriptions of the sutras around with us to give us confidences. Many sutras end with the invocation:- **"By the power of this truth, may victory be mine"** or **"may happiness be mine"**. This shows that as Buddhists we do not believe in the animistic power of images or talismans, but that they are to be regarded as mere aids which could help us to gain confidence in ourselves.

In the same way some Buddhists also go to temples, to collect bottles of holy water and pieces of string over which the sutras have been recited with great concentration. These also give psychological strength and confidence to the user because they remind him of the truth which was uttered in the sutras and which recall the words of the Buddha.

SICKNESS

Recently there have been many criticisms leveled against Buddhist leaders that they do not seem to care for those who are sick. Critics point out that followers of certain other religions do go from hospital to hospital comforting sick patients. Such concern for the sick is something which is indeed commendable. In Buddhist countries devotees invite monks to visit the sick and the monks are more than willing to render assistance in this respect. In fact learned monks who are very well versed in traditional medicine, are often consulted and they even render their voluntary services.

Since many Buddhists are not well versed in their own religion to counteract the tactics of other religionists, such apathy only enable the followers of other religions to take advantage of the situation to convert them. Such other religionists have even gone to the extent of promising salvation by frightening their victims with the threat of hell and in this way have won converts! Buddhist monks want to have no part in this. However they will willingly accompany family members and close friends when invited to visit the sick, not only in hospital but at home as well.

Sickness is part and parcel of our daily existence in this world, and we should take this in its stride. Nevertheless, in the event of sickness befalling a person, it would be advisable, apart from resorting to modern medical treatment, to invite monks to perform religious blessing services for the speedy recovery of the patient. Such blessings when received with a proper frame of mind will exert a considerable spiritual and psychological influence on the patient, thus accelerating his recovery. In particular, when the illness happens to be associated with the attitude of the patient's mind, a blessing service by a monk would be most helpful. In instances where the belief is that an illness has been caused by some bad external influence or evil spirits, a religious blessing service would create a good psychological attitude which in turn could radiate beneficial vibrations within the body to promote speedy recovery. However, as understanding Buddhists, we should not surrender ourselves to the erroneous belief that evil spirits are the sole cause of our sickness. The Buddha's advice – **“Whenever you are physically sick, don't allow your mind also to be sick”** is indeed very true. In accordance with this advice, we must be guided by our intelligence and common sense to seek proper medical attention for our illness rather than to succumb ourselves to ill-founded superstition.

DEATH

Man is mortal and death is to be expected. However, very few people can accept the separation or the fear of what happens after death.

There is so much ignorance among Buddhists regarding death that people even change their religion so that they can get a “proper” funeral to ensure a short-cut to heaven. Families have been known to be separated because children who belong to one religion hastily convert their sick parents on their death bed. Some Buddhist children are powerless because they have not learned what to do as true Buddhists. It is therefore very important for Buddhist parents to make their wishes known clearly and to teach their children what to do as Buddhists in the event of their death. Many ignorant people have taboos against death and do not like to attend funerals during certain periods thinking that it will bring bad luck to themselves.

Children must learn from young that death is a natural part of existence. They must learn not to be unnaturally afraid at the sight of coffins and corpses. They must know what is the sensible thing to do at a funeral. If this is not done and when a death occurs, young adults will be at a loss and be at the mercy of unscrupulous religious people who either use this opportunity to convert them to their faith, or make them spend large sums of money on superstitious and other meaningless practices.

First of all we must understand the Buddhist attitude towards death. Scientifically speaking “Life” is an incessant series of rising and falling. The cells in our body are constantly dying and are replaced by new ones. As such, birth and death are taking place every moment. The phenomenon of death is merely a more dramatic ending of this continual process. But the end is not permanent. In fact in the very next “Beat” after death, rebirth takes place. So in Buddhism, death is not ‘being called to eternal rest to lie in the bosom of some creator deity’ but a continuation of a process in another form. So there is no need to fear death. In view of this, the Buddha did not prescribe any specific rites regarding the disposal of a corpse. The body of a dead person should be removed with dignity and be treated properly out of respect for the memory of what the deceased person had done when he was alive. His past action (**Karma**) will determine what his future life will be.

We are grateful for whatever services the dead person had rendered to us in the past. Sorrow arises in our minds because someone we love has departed from our midst. When we gather around the body of a loved one, as friends and relatives we find solace in the company of others who share our common sorrow and who give us moral support in our hour of grief. The different cultural practices we perform are useful because they help us to minimize our sorrow.

POST MORTEM

Nowadays in cases where death has occurred in special circumstances which would necessitate further investigation, it has become a common practice for hospitals to conduct post mortems on the bodies of such dead persons to verify the cause of death. Sometimes relatives object to this practice thinking that it is somewhat sacrilegious to cut up or mutilate a corpse. As far as Buddhists are concerned there should be no religious reason to object to this practice. In fact, if such a post mortem could help the living by providing members of the medical profession with more information which could enable them to cure diseases it should be considered an act of merit on the part of Buddhists. As has been said earlier the physical body is nothing more than a combination of elements which will disintegrate on death. So there is no reason to believe that the spirit of the dead person will be upset if the body is used for scientific purposes. We can be rest assured that doctors and medical aides have a high sense of responsibility and professional ethics and that they would handle a corpse with the utmost respect due to it, so relatives need not be unduly worried about this. There are some who even pledge to donate their bodies after their death to hospitals for medical students to study anatomy.

In this connection, it is considered an act of the highest merit for Buddhists to donate parts of their bodies after death so that others would benefit from them. The Buddha himself on numerous occasions in his previous lives donated his body for the benefit of others. He gave his eyes, blood and flesh and on one occasion sacrificed his whole body in order to save the lives of others. Buddhism is very clear on the issue – that the donation of vital organs for the benefit of others brings great merit and is to be strongly encouraged.

FUNERAL

In most cultured and civilized societies a funeral is considered as a sad and solemn occasion. A Buddhist funeral should accordingly be a solemn occasion and should be conducted as such.

There is a widespread superstition among some people that it is “bad luck” to bring a corpse into a home if a person has died elsewhere. We are bound to show our respect for the memory of the dead person to treat the body with proper respect by giving it a decent funeral. Whether the body is brought home or not depends on what is most convenient for the bereaved members of the family. In this connection we should also mention that there should be no fears or taboos regarding the handling of a dead person. Some people are afraid to touch a corpse thinking they will be faced with “bad luck”. If this were true doctors and nurses should be the most miserable people on earth! If we truly wish to honour the memory of our departed ones, we should bathe and dress the body and not leave it to some stranger from an undertaker’s firm to do it for us. Remember that superstition, ignorance and irrational fear brings more “bad luck” than gratitude, love and good taste.

Contrary to popular belief, the noisy, elaborate and sometimes showy or grand funeral processions costing thousands of dollars on unnecessary things and which are often regarded as normal 'Buddhist practices', are in fact not Buddhist practices at all. It is a total misconception to associate all these practices with Buddhism. They are just the perpetuation of age-old customs and traditions handed down from past generations which are being adhered to blindly. When viewing such funeral rites, people of other faiths often wonder whether what they are watching is a procession celebrating some happy festival or a solemn funeral.

Quite often a loud music instead of solemn music, is performed during a funeral procession. One would therefore gain the impression that the ceremony is designed more to make an outward show of affluence rather than to express genuine sorrow and respect for the deceased. Although Buddhism does not object to perpetuating cultural practices, so long as they are not in conflict with the teachings of the Buddha, it is felt that wasteful, uneconomical and unnecessary practices which are not beneficial either to the departed or the living should be discouraged or discarded altogether. For example, the traditional practice of burning paper money, joss-paper and symbolic paper houses, designed purportedly for the benefit of a deceased person for use in the life hereafter, is definitely unBuddhistic. However, if it helps one psychologically to minimize one's sorrow by making him think he is doing something beneficial for the departed, it is harmless, but nonetheless one should not go to extremes or believe it can help the deceased in any way.

Buddhism does not object to different communities performing different funeral rites which are suitable for each locality and time. But the most important thing is that they must be culturally acceptable and practical. The rites attached to a Buddhist funeral should be simple, solemn, dignified and meaningful. In many countries Buddhist monks are invited to the house of the deceased to perform religious rites prior to a funeral. The offering of flowers and the burning of a few joss-sticks and candles are normally accepted religious practices on such an occasion.

It is customary as a mark of respect, for friends and relatives to send wreaths of flowers for the funeral. These should preferably be ordered so as to arrive at the house not earlier than the afternoon before the funeral, otherwise on the sad day itself they may be faded. However if the obituary notice specifically states "no flowers", then this request should be strictly respected.

Because relatives have different opinions on funeral rites there are many arguments about the proper rituals to be performed. People have often asked the following questions:

1. Should there be a burial or cremation?
2. If cremation, what does one do with the ashes?
3. What kind of coffin must we use?
4. Must we wear black or white mourning clothes?
5. What colour of candles must be used, red or white?
6. How many days must the body be kept before burial or cremation?
7. What is the limit of expenditure for a funeral?

All these questions can simply be answered in this way:

The funeral must be simple, with the least amount of fuss, but with dignity. Perhaps the most sensible thing to do would be for the immediate members of the family and close friends to have an informal discussion on the best way to conduct the funeral service in

conformity with prevailing practice, with quiet dignity and without occurring unnecessary expense. If they are unable to attend to this themselves, then it is advisable that this be left to a reputable undertaker as he would understand all that is to be done and thus will take much trouble and responsibility off the relatives' hands. Advice may be also sought from a respectable monk who can really guide the family as to what would be the best way to conduct a funeral in a befitting manner that would be in accordance with the Buddhist way of life. It has to be remembered that as far as Buddhist rites are concerned there are no hard and fast rules to be strictly observed. In this as in all matters we must always try to follow the Buddha's advice to maintain moderation and respectability in whatever we do, without causing harm to others. If we can use the occasion to contemplate with gratitude the good work done by the deceased during his life time, to remember that we ourselves will have to depart some day and that we should do whatever good we can for so long as we live, then our contribution would be meaningful and dignified.

What is the proper attire for a funeral? In Buddhism we are advised to always dress decently and moderately. There is no hard and fast rules as to what we should wear at a funeral, but good taste dictates that we should dress sombrely and discard ornaments in deference to the feelings of the bereaved family and out of respect for the memory of the deceased. A woman in mourning may perhaps wear her wedding or engagement ring. It is better to wear clothes which are in black, white, grey or some such related colour but the matter is entirely left to the individual and his sense of propriety even though '**black**' is normally recognized as the accepted symbol for mourning.

How long should a body be kept before burial or cremation? We who live in a hot and humid climate should understand that decomposition takes place very fast and that it is unhygienic to keep a body for far too long. Besides, it would impose a great strain on the relatives of the deceased in having to bear with the proximity of the corpse for a period longer than is really necessary. Also certain mourners out of sheer emotional grief tend to kiss the body and touch it excessively. This is understandable given the strong emotional feelings that people have to bear, but it should not be overdone or encouraged. While one cannot dictate exactly as to how long a body should be kept, it is wise not to unnecessarily prolong the rites. As a general rule it seems most practical to allow a lapse of about a day or two for funeral arrangements to be made and for friends or relatives to be informed.

On the day of the funeral, the services of Buddhist monks would again be called on to perform the necessary religious service at the home and at the cemetery. It has been the practice amongst certain people to offer roasted pigs and chickens as symbolic offerings for the deceased. Such a practice is not encouraged in Buddhism because it involves the killing of innocent animals. To offer sacrificial offerings to the departed ones is definitely against the teachings of the compassionate Buddha and should be discarded. Simple floral tributes together with the burning of incense and candles would suffice as symbolic offerings.

BURIAL AND CREMATION

Many Buddhists have asked whether a deceased person should be buried or cremated. Buddhism, being a free religion, is flexible on this issue. There is no hard and fast rule, although in some Buddhist countries, cremation is the normal accepted practice. The choice of one method or another should be in accordance with the last wish of the deceased or be left to the discretion of the next-of-kin.

In the modern concept however, cremation as a hygienic form of disposal of the body, should be encouraged. With the improvement in health standards and the so-called population explosion, usable land is becoming scarce and hence it is advisable to resort to cremation and allow the use of valuable land for the living instead of crowding it with innumerable tombstones.

Whether for burial or cremation, it has been observed that certain people for sentimental reasons, would like to put valuable personal belongings of the deceased into the coffin in the hope and belief that the departed one would in some way benefit by it. It is a fallacy to expect that burial or burning of such belongings would have any merit at all. Instead of putting such things inside a coffin or a crematorium it would be much more practical and sensible to donate the useful personal belongings, such as clothing, shoes and many other things to the poor and the needy or to some charitable institution. Any help to the poor and needy is an act of merit which benefits the living and the dead. The fear that some people have with regard to the use of belongings of a deceased person is meaningless and unsustainable.

DISPOSAL OF ASHES

The question has often been asked whether it would be better to bury the ashes, enshrine them in a building or have them strewn into the sea. The Buddha did not leave any specific instructions on the matter because he wanted us to understand that the body is nothing more than a combination of physical materials which will ultimately return to the same element groups after death. The Buddha taught that the material form of the body is made up of the elements of Solidity, Fluidity, Heat and Motion. Upon death only two elements will remain, namely Solidity and Fluidity which, when reduced to ashes, has no spiritual significance. Because we regard the remains as a reminder of the dead person whom we had once loved, we treat them with respect. But we must not get attached to them or even think that they in any way will have any link with the person who has since died. Buddhism teaches that the life force departs immediately after death and that it takes on another life form elsewhere.

The practice of keeping the remains of the dead goes back to our earliest past. In those days when people believed in a permanent life force, it was the practice like in the case of the Egyptians to preserve the remains in the hope that the departed spirit would thereby maintain contact with the living. Great imposing tombs and monuments were built around them. But such practices were reserved only for important personages like kings and religious leaders. The rest of the population's remains were simply disposed of in any suitable way.

In contrast to this there is another practice, namely that of ancestral worship whereby the living maintained contacts with the dead by observing ritualistic practices around the dead. This gave rise to the practice of preserving the ashes in urns or other receptacles to be revered – a practice which is still being carried on even to this day.

Some people wish to enshrine the remains in a building while others bury them. Another method is to throw the ashes into the sea or a river. This is basically a Hindu custom where the belief is that the remains will ultimately be re-united with the original creative force.

There is no harm in adopting any of these methods but they must not be considered as

being specifically Buddhist or which Buddhists must follow. Also we should not get the wrong idea that by keeping the remains in a holy place like a temple the departed person will be “safe” from having to experience the effects of his karma. It is alright as a mark of respect in the memory of the dead, but nothing more. In Buddhism, the manner of disposing of the remains of the deceased is for the bereaved family to decide so long as good taste and decorum prevail.

PERIOD OF MOURNING

When a person dies, close relatives usually spend a certain period of time in mourning. The length of the mourning period depends upon the tie which existed between the deceased and members of the bereaved family. During this time they dress in a certain way, abstain from most forms of merrymaking and entertainment. Some people wear white, others black and some do not attend weddings or other celebrations until a year has passed and so on. These are not specifically “Buddhist” observances because the Buddhist scriptures do not refer to them as such. However different communities have developed certain rites based on their own cultural practices and these have come to be accepted as being “Buddhist”. Their intention is to honour the memory of the departed one, to remind one of his own mortality and so develop a greater sense of spiritual awareness. If intelligently followed, and if these practices do not interfere with the necessary process of living, then as Buddhists we have no reason to object to them. **The Buddhist Way is the Middle Way, the Path of Moderation in All Things.**

POST – FUNERAL RITES AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

Then there are questions about post-funeral rites. Some people hold prayer services for the deceased on the seventh day, forty-ninth day and on the one hundredth day while others, besides the seventh day, do it after three months and one year. Some people do believe that the spirit of the dead would return during these specific times. But whether or not we believe in this is not important. A sensible religious service in memory of the dead where friends and relatives gather to share a spiritual experience and to give moral support to reduce the grief of the bereaved family is ennobling. But there is no necessity to insist that the service must be held on a specific date. Any date convenient to all concerned should be acceptable for the performance of the service.

CHENG BENG or **ALL SOULS’** day is not a Buddhistic term or practice. But it is certainly a good gesture when a whole community sets aside a special day to remember their departed ones by collectively cleaning the cemetery, and offering flowers as a mark of respect. This would indicate that the deceased’s descendants are filial and have fulfilled their obligations to their forbears. Buddhism does not object in anyway to this excellent exercise in gratitude and remembrance enabling the young to show respect for their elders and to emulate a good traditional practice of honouring the spirits of departed ancestors. However, the fear that some people create in the minds of innocent people that the departed will return to torment or disturb the family members if they do not perform certain rituals is groundless.

ALMS GIVING

It is common practice in most communities to conduct religious services for the dead during the prescribed periods following the funeral. The Buddhist practice is to partake in almsgiving and to transfer merits to the departed. To do this relatives and friends of

the deceased usually invite a number of monks and offer them requisites such as food and medicine. These offerings which contribute to the material welfare of holy people is considered to be an act of merit. Understanding Buddhists also extend their donations to charitable institutions, needy persons and religious building projects as well as to publish free religious booklets and literature for distribution to the public to perpetuate the memory of the departed ones. The devotees who give the offerings do so with pure hearts and develop a wholesome state of mind. They do these good deeds in memory of the dead person, and develop wholesome mental links with the dead person. If the departed one is in a favourable position to receive these mental radiations (**transference of merits**) he will be greatly benefited. If on the other hand he is not in such a position, then the good deeds are not wasted because they will help the living persons who generated such good thoughts to reach a higher level of spiritual well-being. Buddhist monks in any temple will gladly assist members of the bereaved family with regard to what needs to be done to conduct such an almsgiving service.

CONCLUSION

It is fervently hoped that our local Buddhist leaders would take due cognizance of some of the foregoing prevalent practices which are negative in character and other prejudices with a view to causing reform to be effected so that whatever practices that are being carried out by us would be more meaningful. It is felt that our leaders should conduct a basic reappraisal of current practices and recognize the urgent need to bring about such reform through public education and the widest possible publicity be directed towards this end.