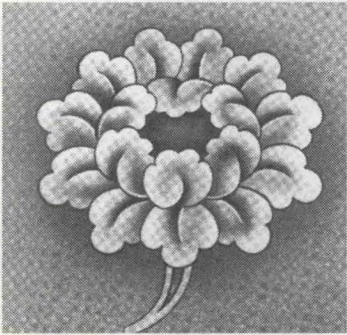


TRANSITIONS PART III

Funeral Ceremonies



Geshe Tashi Tsering, resident lama at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London, explains the significance of rituals when a person has died.

"The purpose of praying at the time of death is wide-ranging. For example, one reason for making prayers is for the sake of the people who are left

behind – relatives, parents, friends, loved ones – for the sake of their minds. By praying for a dear one who has died, they feel they have done something spiritually for that person. So even though it is a sad occasion, psychologically, there is a feeling of positive spirit.

There is, importantly, also a very profound reason: to assist the person's spiritual needs during the process of passing away. In Tibetan Buddhism, during the process of dying, Sangha members recite prayers and read from meditative manuals. Doing this in front of the body is considered to be beneficial in assisting the person's death process, especially if that person used to do these practices in their life. The idea is that although the gross consciousness has ceased to function, the subtle consciousness

needs to be assisted through the process to reach the subtlest consciousness, which is called the "clear light mind." Helping that person to reach the clear light mind also assists that consciousness to realize emptiness.

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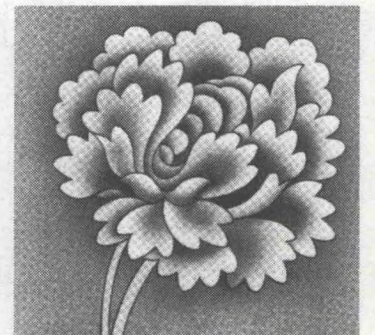
This can also change the subsequent steps in the process, such as preventing one from entering into

an ordinary intermediate state and rebirth so that one instead moves into a higher realization. There are many different levels of blessing, prayer, or ritual that can be performed at the time of death, depending on which of the many purposes is appropriate. The prayers themselves are done according to that person's needs, such as reciting some prayers in front of the body, or in the cemetery, reciting prayers together with the relatives and friends of the deceased in the presence of the dead body. Also, as mentioned earlier, longer prayers or extensive meditation manuals can be recited in the presence of the dead body.

Marking these three occasions [see *Mandala* April for baby-naming and June for marriage ceremonies] is very important, because Buddhадharma can be practiced not only individually for enlightenment but, as a whole, for the benefit of others, the whole society. Buddhадharma must engage with society, not just perform rituals and give teachings in monasteries and temples. These activities are important, of course, but marking events such as the three occasions with blessings and prayers is also very important.

Advice from Geshe Gelek Chodpa

With so many Buddhist centers of varying traditions in Western countries, diversity is reflected in the outer form of Buddhist practice each time the teachings migrate from one culture to another. Resident teacher at Kadampa Center in North Carolina, Geshe Gelek Chodpa, has helped students understand the inner aspect of various rituals and the purpose of various structures and practices. "This understanding, in turn, helped us learn how to adapt rituals and practices to communal ceremonies," Emily Paynter reports.



One of these communal ceremonies, our memorial service, has evolved the most. We have had five services over several years, each changing in form. Each new change was in response to sponsor requests, as well as a result of developing awareness about how to increase participant understanding and participant involvement.

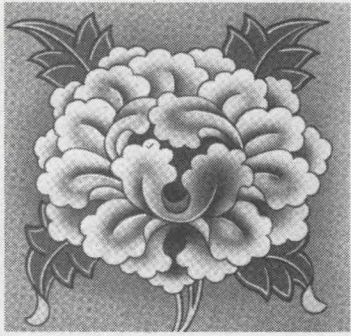
All memorial services so far have been conducted either within the forty-nine-day period following death or on the one-year anniversary date. All services have provided participation opportunities through reading prayers, offering flowers and candles, displaying photos and personal items, and speaking words of remembrance. Our most recent memorial service engaged participants in formal aspects of the program as well.

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Our newest version uses a liturgical structure that parallels the seven-limb prayer. It also includes formal elements that allow participants to encourage the deceased to maintain a positive focus.

Although deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhist prayers and practices, our current service is in many ways generic. Friends and family of the deceased can incorporate personal elements into the liturgical structure. The deceased's faith tradition, if non-Buddhist, can be appropriately acknowledged.

We currently have a memorial service prayer book that helps orient participants to the liturgy and where they join in collectively and singly (as they wish). A supplementary brochure is planned to explain the meanings of the various elements in the service. Sponsors and Kadampa Center members have expressed appreciation for the depth and richness of the ceremony.



Medicine Buddha Jangwa

A Purification Ceremony for the Deceased

Compiled from the advice and teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Lama Konchog

Jangwa is a skilled tantric practice of purification, used when somebody has died. Even if

the person is in the intermediate state on the way to the lower realms, you can still do jangwa and change the direction of the person's reincarnation. You can cause the person to reincarnate in a pure land or in a deva or human realm.

Within the practice of jangwa, there are different means of purification, but the recitation of powerful purification mantras is one of the primary methods used. You use the mantras to bless mustard

seeds. Through meditation, you hook the [consciousness of the] people who have died, and then you throw the blessed mustard seeds over them to purify them. Finally, you do *powa* to transfer their consciousness to a pure land. After that, if you don't have ashes or parts of the body, you burn the photograph of the deceased person or the piece of paper with the deceased person's name written on it while meditating on emptiness.

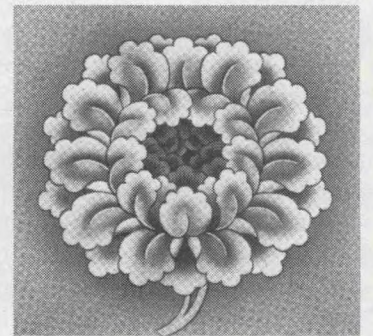
This particular practice of jangwa associated with the Medicine Buddha is especially accessible and can be practiced by those of us who are not advanced practitioners. We ordinary people can perform this highly beneficial practice using this version without risking the possibility of creating further interferences for ourselves or for the

deceased. Other jangwa practices associated with other specific deities require a high level of skill on the part of those doing the practice – skill in visualization, in self-generation, in ritual accuracy – in order to perform the practice correctly without creating hindrances and interferences.

Sometimes a lama will do a jangwa for a number of deceased persons on a specific day. For instance, in July of this year Geshe Ngawang Drakpa, resident lama at Tse Chen Ling Buddhist Center in San Francisco, was the master of ceremonies at a Medicine Buddha jangwa that took place at Land of Medicine Buddha, for which relatives and friends sent along photos of the deceased, and made donations. About 65 people attended.

Trying on a Coffin

Pamela Gray issued an unusual invitation to her local community in Milton, New South Wales, Australia – to try on a coffin for size or add a few layers to a papier maché prototype coffin. Her idea in forming the "ExtraOrdinary Death Company" was to help people to make friends with death. The display included books and information on death and dying, coffins and funerals.



In making friends with death we're following the ideas of people who want to do things naturally: such as supporting people staying at home at the end of their lives with the assistance of volunteers; providing information about the natural dying process; teaching people about writing instructions for the end of their life, e.g., whether or not to be in hospital or to have medical intervention; spelling out how we'd like our funeral to be, making our own coffins – especially from old materials – and putting them to good use now as a drinks cabinet, a blanket box, or a coffee table.

"If we're actively involved in death and dying, which is with us every day, we'll have little, if any, need for grief counseling after the event. We'll probably be able to clear up conflicts in our life, sorting out our affairs and not being "caught short." We can go beyond reacting to death with total fear or with a "head-in-the-sand" attitude of denial. We can rest in natural great peace!

"In Australia there are licensed "celebrants" – usually non-religious people who have a license to

conduct marriages specifically. But typically we who are licensed celebrants also do naming ceremonies and funeral ceremonies. I've mostly done weddings in the last six years, but I have also done about fifteen naming ceremonies and two funeral ceremonies.

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"Funerals and death and dying are of huge interest to me for some reason, beyond the usual "I'm going to die," etc. Not many other people are motivated to get into this business."

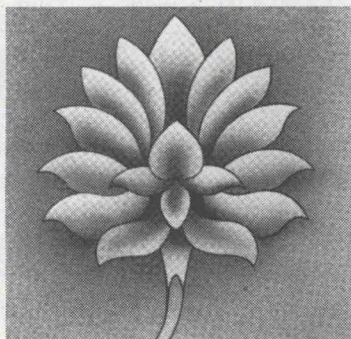
Pamela is also part of a lobby group hoping that the laws in each state become uniform throughout Australia and that these laws begin to take into account and respect various religious/philosophical

practices and beliefs.

"Those of us involved in the ExtraOrdinary Death Company will be making coffins and running workshops in coffin-making and decorating. We hope to have a sort of hospice one day, or at least to train volunteers or others to be with people at the end of their lives. Perhaps we will be able to have a vehicle or two for carrying coffins and bodies from place – to place and to rent out air-conditioners so that people will be able to have their dead friend or relative at home until the funeral.

"I have been teaching a class called 'Creating Funerals to Celebrate Life.' The class lasts twelve hours over eight weeks, and it's a lot of fun – provocative, radical, but natural, and somehow reassuring and supportive. It is offered through an organization for retirees called the University of the Third Age (U3A). I hope to do more of these courses so others can come to them."

You can contact Pamela at glitter@scoastnet.com.au or Tel: 61. 2. 4454 0880



Care for the Dying



Advice from a Buddhist perspective for anyone in the service of helping others at the time of death and dying is available from www.fpmt.org/shop/ for \$US10 plus postage. The text, entitled "Care for the Dying," includes how to cultivate a healthy attitude for helping, practical advice for

what to do at the time of death, and what to do after death to benefit others. Also contains a list of current FPMT Hospice services, a list of practices to do to help those who have died and comments on euthanasia and compassion. Helpful for anyone wishing to be prepared about how to help family and friends at such a critical time. ☸