

Buddhist Death Practices

Tahn Pamutto, May 2024

Hello, everybody. Today, something a little different. Recently, I've been asked in a few different ways, various aspects about how Buddhists relate to death, what to do in preparation for death, should we want to know how to prepare ourselves, or what to do for somebody who has passed away. And there's actually quite a lot in the canonical, in Theravada Buddhism, but also in other forms of Buddhism, Yāna, Vajrayāna Buddhism. So I thought to collect some of those ideas and see where that gets us going to put out some of the understandings that are found in the suttas and others I found through surveying the various kinds of buddhist practices and spiritual practices in general relating to death and to our part in it, because this is the one thing we are all guaranteed to experience.

It's one thing that connects us, is that everybody who lives dies. And so hopefully everybody could get some use out of this. And again, many of these things, because I don't have memory of the past, nor do I have foresight into the future. A lot of these are taken from the supreme or from things that I've read or studied. And so I am not saying these as a personal authority with any kind of psychic knowledge, saying, thus have I heard, and I would not say something unless I have reason to accept it as a working premise.

If something doesn't make sense, I will very intentionally leave it out. But if I see no reason to think something is not worth believing or not worth giving a try and seeing, if it happens to be true, then I'll put it out there. So if you're listening to this, you're probably a human being and really talking about death. First we have to talk about life. So human life typically begins with what the Buddha refers to in just a few places, as a gandhabba.

And a gandhabba is a sort of disembodied consciousness that has the intention to be born as a human being. And this, because it's disembodied, it doesn't have any agency, but what it does is seek out a suitable host. And there are various accounts of people, even before they've passed away from a previous life, starting to have premonitions about their coming life, about where it will be or who the parents will be. And if you've ever had the experience of eating breakfast and finding yourself thinking about dinner and what you'll have, then maybe you can understand this is not so far fetched. Sometimes people are actually already starting.

The kamma is already starting to generate the next birth. But in what we'd assume to be the majority of cases, the person has already passed away. And they've gone through the process of having to let go of their previous attachments to previous life and family and all those things. And so the gandhabba state is them really seeking their next experience in Samsara, the next form of birth. And they will tend to seek out and then kind of hang around or shadow a set of parents.

There's no set timeframe for this to happen or set way that this will happen. But it said that this is something that does happen. And at some point it's said that the gandhabba descends into the womb. And at that point, there's a kind of sort of violent or traumatic experience of being shunted through all these various energetic states to actually associate and hypothetically take residence in that body. And if it's still in the womb, then that particular consciousness is now treated to the jarring experience of being.

Being blind and only being able to hear strange sounds coming through the womb. But the next process that follows is it goes on to birth. And then the person grows up. And through this process, they start out not being able to do anything, not having any control over their body. But gradually they begin to see and hear and taste and touch and move about in the world.

And any memories or associations or ideas they had from previous existences begin to melt away as the being more and more identifies with their current existence. To the point that while many children have been documented to have some idea of a previous life that they might have had, by the time you get to be seven, eight, nine, if it exists at all, it's like just a faded memory of a dream. And very, very few adults have any idea what they were before their current existence. It just kind of fades because our current existence becomes so relevant and engaging that we forget it was ever any different. While we live, we're sustained by basically dealing with the lifestream, kamma, dealing with the vitality principle.

So we have a set amount of fuel for human life. And some of this is kamma that we do, and some of it is vipāka kamma where, or the results of past kamma. So we are born with a certain amount of vipāka kamma. Like our past actions have conditioned a certain amount of vitality for this particular birth. But there's also things that we can actively do to kind of make the most of that and draw that out, extend that if we would like.

There's also things that other people can do. It's not all on us. A doctor might give us a good diagnosis or good medicine. A loved one might inspire us or encourage us or take care of us in a hard time and help us renew our energy and our vigor for life. So there's a whole lot of kmmas that can take place to keep us going.

But the other thing is, there are kmmas that are for killing us. Most of these are kind of diluted by our kamma for living. So we might get a cold or get the flu or get an injury, and these tend not to kill us. We survive them because the principle for living is still active, and the principle for dying is not strong enough. But at some point, one or the other will lead to the process of death.

Either the vitality principle runs out, there's not enough to sustain it, or a particularly strong death kamma brings about the end of our life. And it is possible, and the Buddha talks about this, that a person leading up to the end of their life can have some premonitions about this. It said that those who practice breath meditation specifically can develop a knowledge or just an intuition about the exact amount of vitality that they have left. And there are a couple of instances in the Suttas where a meditator has mastered breath meditation, knows down to the exact time of day that their vitality will run out. And because they're so calm and collected and ready for it, they're not killed by something else.

They just simply run out of fuel, and that's when they pass away. And other times, it's possible, if a very strong death kamma is about to take precedence, about to claim a person's life, they could have an intuition about that because, well, for the most part, we kind of muddle through life, not really sure about the kamma that is making things happen in our life. Sometimes we do get awareness of it, especially when it's something as important as the end of our life. There can be premonitions.

And the Buddha talks about some people will get a series of signs that are indicating what might follow after death or that death is coming. And there can also be a period of time, probably not more than seven days, usually quite less than that. If you talk to people who work in hospitals, where it becomes very, very clear that the person is going to pass away. And those who work in hospice have a variety of things that they can look for. There's also a variety of things listed in Tibetan texts that can be looked for that deal with the way that the vitality principle kind of unravels and the elements which sustain the body, the earth, wind, fire, and water just kind of dissipate.

There's nothing holding them together anymore. So the person might become very cold. Their lips might dry out. They might be very thirsty or very hungry or lose their appetite completely. Their breath might become very shallow or very ragged.

You might hear the death rattle. And all of these are signs that there's no longer enough vitality principle and that death is imminent. At some point, death occurs in medicine. They're not really sure where to draw the line, but typically, you would say, when the heart stops beating, the lungs stop breathing, the blood stops getting to the brain. Eventually, you reach a point where the body is no longer alive.

But this isn't necessarily the point where this life ends, because there is still mental components. And what follows is a bit gray and is not covered much in the Pali canon, although it is explored in Tibetan texts. There's a particular text called the Bardo Thödol, I may have mispronounced that, known in English as the Tibetan Book of the Dead, but it's not an exact translation, which talks all about this and is designed as a sort of manual that you would read to the person who has passed away with the idea that their consciousness or their mental faculties are still kind of lingering in the vicinity of the body. It's said that for about 24 hours or so, in most cases, that consciousness will slip into kind of sleepy unconsciousness due to the trauma of losing control of all the bodily faculties.

The body is now immovable. It's not working. The brain stops working as an organ of thought, and so the consciousness is just kind of rattled by that. But eventually it'll sort of emerge, and the body no longer has the five senses and it no longer has all of the neurons that have been supporting complex thought, but it still has a lot of the mental components. And so the bardo, as is presented, could be very short.

It could be a process of the consciousness just realizing this and realizing it's got to let go and moving on and moving towards its next state of existence. Or it could be drawn out to as much as 49 days. So many buddhist countries, there are set periods of mourning and sort of anniversaries or funerals that are held at the day after they pass away, seven days after they pass away, and on and on out to 49 days. And this is the reason because unless you have some sort of psychic faculties to be able to interact with that being, then you don't really know. The best you can do is kind of contemplate how you relate to the body of the deceased.

But from the deceased perspective, they will emerge, and they will not be taking things into their senses, but they will still be taking them in through the mental faculties. So they will be aware of what's going on. But if they're not very developed in terms of their mind and their ability to see mental activity, they will be very much drawn by their habits through this experience. And if they hear people

crying at the place that they passed away, they might perceive it as wailing and sirens or rainstorms. And whereas if they hear chanting, they might perceive it as heavenly beings or lights or something.

So they're very impressionable, like we are in a dream. And they linger for quite a while, and all sorts of psychological aspects of ignorance and our inability to face hard realities might come into play. They might see the corpse as the corpse of an animal, not realizing it's them. There is in Thailand, in Burma, in a number of Buddhist countries, there's this idea that if a person dies very suddenly or unexpectedly, whether it be an accident or a murder or an overdose or a suicide, the resulting period after the being might have no concept that they've died. And if this were to be, what conditions their next birth, if it follows on that, they don't let go, they don't realize they've passed.

They don't come to terms with that. The next birth that could follow could be the birth of Preta, which is a hungry ghost, an unfortunate spirit that is dictated by attachments to their previous existence. And so, in a lot of ways, the things that we do around funerals and offerings are just in anticipation of this, to try to offer something to help that being as they're in this bardo state or intermediary state. The Tibetan Book of the Dead also talks about how the mind will move through various things, things that it expects to happen and things that just come up in relation to its kamma and to its thought patterns. It might see demons coming to punish it, or it might see angels coming to praise it for its good deeds.

It might revisit scenes from its life. There might be a sense of a judge kind of weighing things. The underlying message of the Tibetan book of the Dead is that this is just in the mind. There aren't great courtrooms full of beings who are going to decide your fate. A lot of it is your karma, is your mental activity.

And if you realize that and wake up to that and develop equanimity, compassion, and wholesomeness, mind states, then all of the difficult parts of this process will sort of melt away, and there'll be clarity and light and freedom in letting go. So it's not a completely passive state that you're kind of drawn through, but you can wake up to your ability to influence this process of letting go and have all of the mental constituents that being feelings, memories and perceptions, mental habits and consciousness itself, as they begin to disperse and dissolve and stop being all one person. You can have a fortunate rebirth following on or even opt out, get out of samsara entirely through enlightenment.

So that follows on to the next phase, whatever it might be. And this is dictated partially by vipāka kamma, by the things that you've done in your previous existence or many previous existences prior. Or it can be active kamma. As I said, if you're actively involved in wholesome mind states or you've actively cultivated meditation, then you will have a lot of choices in where you might, your next existence might take place. But what will happen is a necessary letting go of the past existence.

So memories will carry on of what happened in that existence. But in all reality, that being no longer exists because that being only existed when all of its very, its various constituents, the memories and the feelings and the habits and the body, were all located in the same place. What follows on is, kamma, is memories, is habits, but is no longer the person that was. And so at the point that this bardo completes and the next birth starts to develop, it becomes gray as to whether or not people thinking about that person or offering things for that person will actually connect with that being, because they will change through this process and they will become something different. If what follows is going to be a human birth, then there will be a new gandhabba stage, in which case the being is already starting

to develop associations and intentions towards their next birth, in which case they will become a different being.

But if they take birth based on unwholesome karma, then they might find themselves in the ghost realm or a hell realm, where they're kind of haunted by their guilt and regret and those sort of punitive parts of their minds until that plays out. Or they might go to a heavenly realm where the good things they've done create merit. And merit being an uplifting force, allows them to go to a fortunate plane where they kind of live based on the vitality principle formed by their merit. So they could be in a subtle body in a sort of heavenly realm, as we would see it, a very fortunate, pleasant realm, based on the fortunate, pleasant things that they did in the immediately preceding life, or some lives before that, and that kamma is now ripening and them being able to go to a fortunate place, this happens within the wheel of sin and sorrow. So if one rebirth happens, then another may happen, another may happen.

And because of this process where ignorance causes us to identify with our birth, we never get out of this cycle. So it will keep going as long as there is that tendency to identify and really latch on to our existence. Now, this leads us to, what does this mean as a Buddhist practitioner? Well, it means quite a lot. And the Buddha has us reflecting on death quite a bit, because when we do, it begins to dissolve the boundaries between the beginning of life and the end of life.

And we realize that samsara is this great cycle that we are just moving through. And while it seems like the present moment and our present circumstances are really the most important thing and all encompassing and what we really have to focus on, if we get this sort of perspective and look at it beyond the scope of just the beginning and end of this life, we realize there's a lot that we can do to improve our circumstances and fix the problem of this cycle, which will inevitably lead us into heartache and misery in the future if we just let it continue. So by reflecting on death, we begin to see that there are a lot of things we can do in anticipation of death. Some of those are to just cultivate the kamma that deals with extending our life. So it's very fortunate to encounter the dhamma, to encounter good people, to encounter the Buddha and his message and the sangha, those who are practicing.

So if we find ourselves with these good circumstances, we'll actually want to extend our life to some degree. So take care of ourselves, let go of the things that cause us suffering to precepts, do what we can in this life. We can make merit, merit being the thing that sustains us and uplifts us in life and in death, and then helps decide where we go in terms of a new birth. It's just a completely useful thing. So we can do all of these good things in life that will help set us up in a positive way, create positive conditions in death.

Then we can also prepare for death itself, thinking about what we would like to have happen, how we would like it to play out, what we'd like to be, reflecting on, how we'd be like to uplift the mind, who would like to be around in that time, and we can start to plan and put conditions into place so that this won't be a jarring, traumatic, horrifying experience. But a known and predictable experience that we find ourselves somewhat prepared for. It's impossible to know exactly when and how it's going to happen, but the more we prepare, the more we set up conditions where when it does happen, we're ready. And we understand that, okay, this life that we are in is coming to an end. What follows will be a lot of opportunities to find ourselves in a better situation or even to attain levels of freedom from the very things that caused us suffering in this life.

There are obvious practices we can do, like meditation, like breath meditation, develop samādhi and the jhānas. These have a very profound effect on what happens after death. They give so much power to the mind and so much agency to the mind to really make decisions not based on habits or defilements, but on, you know, choices, intentional choices. There. There are also certain yogic practices.

Some are described in the book of the Dead. In Tibetan Buddhism in general, there's a practice called phowa, and you can read up and study that. Padmasambhava was one Tibetan teacher who taught a variety of techniques for preparing the energetic parts of the body for death, so that the mental, the parts of the mind won't get stuck in the body at the time of death, when the body actually dies, but can travel out seamlessly and move through that stage of unconsciousness as quickly as possible so that it can start to wake up and attain clarity that, okay, death has happened out in that body. Some of these deal with yogic practices and energy practices, and others are visualizations and aspirations that you can begin to practice. In many ways, these are turned into a mantra, and there's no one set mantra, but I do have one example, and it goes in the light of the Buddha.

May all negative emotions, karmic patterns and unskillful habits be dissolved by the power of the Buddha, dhamma and sangha. May all grasping and attachments be released, all misdeeds forgiven, and all my debts repaid for the sake of unbinding and for the complete freedom from suffering.

This is just one example. You can visualize a Buddha image or holy symbol or a bright light above your crown chakra and use a mantra like this, an aspiration in a lot of ways. It's like studying for a test. It's not that the mantra itself will cause these things to come about. A simple mantra is not going to cause you to be forgiven or cause you to let go of negative emotions, emotions, but the fact that you're doing it and you're thinking about when you'll pass away and you're preparing your mind for the process of letting go, for the process of making amends, asking to be forgiven, letting go of things, wanting everybody that you've hurt to feel a sense of closure and forgiveness and for the best possible outcome.

Just that you're setting those, you're preparing those intentions before you go through this traumatic process of being separated from the four elements, from your body and from the five senses, you're getting ready for that. And then once we do pass away and we do find ourselves in this bardo sort of state, there's not much that we can say definitively. It's going to play out differently for everybody. But it is said in a few sources that these beings are incapable of eating food, but they can be nourished, in a way by merit. Merit that they've done and they reflect upon.

It can be a sense of nourishment and uplifting, just as when we do a good deed, we feel a sense of joy. Yeah, well, that's so much more powerful. When the mind is disembodied, when it's in a rūpa, or subtle form, then this merit is the very thing that causes us to feel full and satiated. But also it said that fragrances do have an impact on these bardo beings. And so you can burn incense or you can set out plates of fragrant food and offer it to that being.

While they won't be able to partake of the food, obviously, just perceiving it and the aroma of it may allow them to feel, in a slight way, nourished.

There's a lot of tendency in Southeast Asia for people to worry about being thirsty, feeling thirst in this state. And so they make a lot of offerings of water to temples and such because they don't want to be without in this sense of thirst or be without water in their passing, because the being who's passed

away, this disembodied bardo being, will be very susceptible to wanting, if any craving still exists in mind. And so these things can kind of help satiate it. What we can do, as those attending and those who are dying, we have a lot of things we can do before they pass away. We can remind them of their good deeds, so that these good deeds are fresh in their mind and they occur to them after passing.

We can stay by as they've passed. It's said, if we can refrain from crying and wailing and causing arguments over inheritance and all of these things near the deceased's body, because the consciousness may be hanging around. We do that, we do it somewhere else, but really try to give some space for whatever process they're going to go through. And it could take a number of days. Again, we don't know.

But to be there and to generate as many wholesome mind states as we can as a kind of offering, but also to bring stability into the space in Buddhist countries, because merit is such a nourishing thing and so important for the being as it passes on. Others can offer or share merit for their sake, because they're no longer able to make merit or do good deeds as they've been disconnected from their body, and they won't be able to come back to it to do anything. So we do it for them and we transfer or share the merits. Basically, what we're doing is we're being the agent for a good act on their behalf. And there's a lot of ways that we do it.

We can do it anytime. It doesn't have to be just the time they die, or seven days or 49 days. Anytime we want, we can share merit with someone. But the Buddha says specifically, this is a very powerful thing to do for a being that's passed away and hasn't yet taken a new birth. There are four general ways that we might make merit that are given in the suttas.

These are just categories, really. But one is to give an offering to practice dana, that is generosity. One is to do a service for another. So the generous act of providing something for another, doing something for another, helping another out, the generous act of teaching, especially teaching the dhamma or teaching truth, and then the act of spiritual cultivation. So all of these are practiced by people as an offering for somebody who's passed away.

And if you want to do something that can be of great benefit to them, I mean, you could erect big statues and have big elaborate parties and parades to kind of celebrate their life, and they may be around to perceive that, or they might miss it again, we don't know. But this sharing of merit tends to have some potent effect, because merit is what the being is really looking for in that transitory state to help them move on. So in terms of giving, giving to even an animal generates merit, to say nothing of giving something to a person. But giving something to a virtuous person is even more meritorious. And one symbol of this is to give something to somebody who is a noble being that has attained or is practicing for one of the stages of enlightenment.

So it's very often, it's very common that people in a Buddhist country will make some effort to get out a temple somewhere and make an offering on the person's behalf. Now the person making the offering gets the merit. Obviously, they're not deprived of it in any way because they share it, but they're also able to offer it and bring that person to mind. In terms of offering service, a lot of people who might spend some time helping out around the temple, or just helping their neighbors, or even the service to the family of the person who's passed away, they come and they help with the funeral, they help with

chores that need to get done. They make monetary offerings, they do whatever they can to make it an easier process for those who are left behind.

All of these things generate even more merit. They're providing something that's needed, and the person used to be able to provide, but no longer can. That can help the deceased to kind of know that it's okay and it's going to be okay so that they can let go and move on. Third way is teaching and reciting suttas, or doing, chanting, or saying kind words. All of these things at the bedside of somebody who's passed away, or at their funeral, at their graves site.

All of these can be great ways to create a space for the being to perceive that if it's possible. And reflecting on that kind of come to a realization, an important realization about where they are, about what's happening, and about what's really important as we move through the cycles of Samsara and what can really lead to the greatest happiness. So these are very powerful things that we can do. And if the person wasn't interested or didn't have any association with it, maybe we don't force our way in and start insisting that we chant these things at the side of the deceased. But because the being in this transitory state does have mental faculty, even if we reflect on it ourselves, there's no way to say that they won't be able to pick that up in our own mindstream and in the own way that we are, so that they will be able to perceive that dhamma.

There's many ways that a dhamma can come out through body language and through subtle intentions that reflect where we are at mentally. So even just thinking about the suttas, or reading the suttas, bringing this into our own lives, and sharing through intention, this with that being. And may they be free, and may they see the clear light, may they let go of their attachments, may they let go of their guilt and regrets, may they go on to happy. Rebirth is all new, nice and beautiful things that we can kind of aspire for their sake. Now, finally, there is mental cultivation.

So we can definitely use the practices that we've cultivated at the bedside. If we're the one passing away, then we will definitely get benefit from all of the meditation we've done. But if we are at the bedside, then our own practice will come into play. And how we relate with survivors, but also how we can be calm and collected and clear and know that this is not as much a tragedy as it is a predictable part of living and dying. Yeah, there's nothing out of place here.

And that there's still a lot of good opportunity for that being's growth as they leave one life and either attain freedom or, or move on to their next incarnation, their next life.

In Buddhist countries, it's also not unheard of, especially if a family member has died, that somebody might take a period of time living at the temple either as a five precepts or eight precept layperson, or to take ordination in the name of that person. To say that, I'd like to offer this, and you can imagine if the disembodied being were to, oh, people must need me. I wonder, what is everybody doing right now? If they were to be drawn by that question and that intention to peek in on somebody, and then they say that this person is doing something incredibly wholesome, incredibly meritorious because of them, for their sake, then this would be a tremendous amount of merit that is being shared with them, a tremendous sense of uplift that, oh, this person I've left behind will be okay. Look, they're, they're more okay than I could ever hope for.

And that will give them serenity and clarity and merit for what follows on.

And so these are, there's a variety of other things that might come up. Buddhists tend to be cremated. This just follows on from back in the Buddhist time, this was the most common way of dealing with a dead body in India, was to cremate it and sort of symbolically release the mental being from the corpse. But also there's something in Tibet which was known as air burial. This happens sometimes in India where a body would just be put somewhere and feasted on by animals.

In the west, we now have a green burial where the body is just buried in a simple cloth so that it will decay and be food for worms and whatnot, or the body can just be buried. But the important thing to know is that best case scenario, the being won't be hanging around for very long. So this is more for the survivors, though it is possible, should that being take a form of birth in a subtle body, say, in one of the heavenly realms, they might from time to time, be curious about those that they developed bonds and associations with in their previous life, because in a subtle body, they're not as susceptible to that period of the gandhabba where they associate, descend into the room, and kind of gradually forget what came before. They haven't gone through that sort of trauma. So to the degree that they're not totally infatuated with their new existence, they might still check on.

And so it's not impossible that we could communicate or have some relationship with one who's passed away. But in terms of us, a best case scenario is to understand that life in samsara always moves forward, it never moves backwards. So there's no way of getting back what we had. And as we pass on, anybody who passes on after us will also be going through this process and will cease to be who they were. And while they'll carry some of the memories and intentions of that, they will then follow on and be born in a new existence.

So it's not really the same being that might appear in the heavenly realm next to us, but it's somebody who's gone through this process and has maybe had the opportunity to change some things along the way, because we do have the ability to change, and this is one of the great things that we discover in practice, whereas we may have been born into ignorance and confusion about what is important and what we'd like to accomplish in this life. We can discover that as we go along and then see the opportunity for change and growth, which doesn't have to end at the time of our death. But we can see this as a continuum where we will continue to get better as long as we put forth this effort, make this kamma, and develop wholesome qualities until such a time that we finally attain enlightenment. And at that point, we are free from this cycle, because this cycle is generated by identification and it's generated by craving. And when we have let go of those two things, then there's nothing to bring a being to take the next incarnation.

And so the mental constituents go form this next period, this next period of life. And it is what we call parinibbāna, or complete unbinding, which is where they go their own way and nothing is lost that was there, because this is, again, just a continuum, the parts that make us up. It's only when they are all together other than that we say, that is me. When they go their own way, they don't necessarily cease immediately, but because they are unbound, because they have gone their own way, you wouldn't say that. That is that being.

And in this way, parinibbāna is like a flame going out in a candle. All of the things that bound the flame to the wick of that candle have been released. And you won't say, where did the flame go? Oh, no, it's died. You know, where did it go?

You just say, oh, it's gone out. The other things that kept it going, which in the case of the mind is craving and ignorance, those have gone out and so we can't find it anymore. And it's actually quite a beautiful and peaceful thing once you begin to understand and in relation to all of the things I just described, much more relaxing and involves a lot less work. So these are just some thoughts collected into kind of things discovered along the way. It's hard to find references to some of these things, but if you are curious about any part of this, I encourage you to go out and look.

You will find a lot of information about people having recollection, past lives of the Buddhist culture, cosmology. There's many good materials on what that looks like. There's the Tibetan Book of the Dead and other books dealing with bardo state and all of the processes that happen at the time of death. And there's also all sorts of materials on how to be around people who are dying, which can help us when we're around those who are dying, but also can help us when we are the one who are dying. So we know sort of what to expect and what is natural in this instance, so that we won't be worried, we won't be upset, we'll be able to maintain our composure and calm, be able to really make the most of everything that we've learned in this journey.

So I offer this to you. May it be of service in your own journey. And good luck.