

Abstract six buddhist
realms. the realm that
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Abstract

Death is one of the natural processes in life. It involves the cessation of life, where all living things enter into a lifeless form. It is shrouded with many mysteries and taboos.

Even though no one really knows what death is, several attempts have been made to explain its nature. One thing is certain though: death is definite. Many cultures in the world have a described philosophy and norms about death. Among them are the Buddhist communities.

Buddhism distinguishes life and death. Life is permanent but death is the transition of a human soul to either one of the six Buddhist realms. The realm that one is reborn depends on ones Karma. If one had such a negative karma, they are reborn into a lower realm. The highest realm is nirvana, a world of total happiness. This world is attainable to any person, while living or dead.

In life, for a person to reach nirvana they must live a life devoid of materialism, while treating other humans with utmost goodwill. Absolute nirvana is only attainable by the holiest of Buddhists, after they die.

Buddhists death cultures vary from community to community, but have several common features, the most common being prayers offered to the dead and their families by the monks. Even though some modern Buddhists mourn expressively, traditional Buddhism does not allow for mourning. It asks its adherents to accept death as it is not the end of life. Even though Buddhism popularity is spreading to the western cultures, it still does not answer the question of what death is.

Introduction

Death is one of the most mysteriously occurring phenomena in the entire world. It is revered, feared celebrated and even hated.

All world communities have a way of marking death either through pompous ceremonies or with a lot of sobriety and mourning. There are many taboos surrounding death. These taboos describe cultural practices that accompany this period. Some communities have even described the type of food to be eaten and the type of cloths to be worn by the bereaved. The nature of death still eludes even the most knowledgeable minds.

This is because man has never been able to define life. The biggest question is what happens to living things when they die. Death is a phenomena surrounded by numerous question that do not have clear-cut answers. For example, if a person brain ceases to function, but other body parts do, is that person dead? If death is the ceasation of life, what is life? Is there a boundary between life and death? Is there a difference between life and consciousness or death and unconsciousness? If a person is unconscious, can they be referred to as dead? Even though there are no answers to this question, what is known is that death is an irreversible phenomenon. Once a person dies, they cannot come back to life. According to scientists, death may be regarded as more of a cessation of life so that the various biological functions of the body no longer work. However, it is still difficult to determine what death is.

While different world communities have similar views of death, Buddhists have one of the most peculiar philosophies, which elaborate the definiteness

of death and the impermanence of life. The purpose of this paper is to explain the concept of death from the Buddhist point of view.

Buddhism Views on Death

Scholars report that Buddhism is both a religion and philosophy, with diverse customs, beliefs and practices, as taught by Gautama Buddha. Gautama Buddha lived and taught his philosophy in 5 BC India. These teachings revolve around the issues of life and death.

Its doctrine teach that all human beings are subject to suffering through rebirths, but can escape their despair and suffering and achieve the state of nirvana, an absolute world of total bliss. Buddhism teaches its followers that even though human beings hold life so dearly living is not a permanent occurrence. Death is part of the natural process. Once a living thing has been born, it will eventually live to old age and die. Even though a person eventually dies, Buddha reports that it is not the absolute end of life but just a transition of the soul from the current body into another realm. The human spirit continues to live, will eventually seek to be reborn, and attached to a new body. What determines the nature of the new rebirth is one's past actions; both positive and negative.

The causes and effects of one's past actions are called Karma. Before an individual's Karma emerges, he/she needs to be reborn first in one of the six realms. They include human beings, heaven, hell, hungry ghost, animal, and Asura.

Existence in any of these Karmas is not definite, as one simply transits from one realm to another depending on the effects of ones Karma. Therefore it

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means one can remain in a certain realm if they do not improve their conduct of living (Tang, paras 2, 3). The process of living is supposed to lead one to a state of nirvana, a world of true happiness, joy and satisfaction. Buddha realized that this state is achievable by any one if they commit their lives to avoiding the desire for worldly pleasures and ill will. Nirvana is an immortal phenomenon, beyond nature and cannot be understood easily. It can only be experienced, not expressed in words. It is the unbinding of a person from the three sins, namely: lobha (greed), dvesha (hate) and moha (Ignorance). It is a world beyond the common sorrows and afflictions that accompany the existence of normal mortals.

Liberation from these afflictions occurs only when one enters into the realm of nirvana (O'Brien para 2, 3). It is the final destination of all human beings. However, it is not a place outside this world, where people go after they die but a realm that can be realized in this world.

It is a world within a world, a realization of life in absolute happiness, goodwill and pure enlightenment on good virtues (BDEA paras 2, 3, 4, 6). However, different Buddhist communities believe that nirvana is either attainable in life or in death (O'Brien para 4). In life, it is the ability to overcome the craving of the joys and pleasures of this world. A person experiences a " world of real ecstasy" and all the person Karmic debts are paid when a person reaches this state in life. Reaching this state as earlier mentioned requires one to live a life of absolute goodwill. In death, only very few monks experience nirvana, a state called absolute or total nirvana (Buddhist temples para 1, 2) The fear of death, according to Buddha comes from the fact that human beings can foretell their death.

They have the knowledge that life is definite and it will eventually end at some point. Death is seen in the changes that happen in the nature surrounding us. These changes culminate in the end of a person's youth hood that ushers in old age. The eventual destination towards a person's realization that youth hood is just a fleeting moment in one's life (Tang para 4).

Halifax explains that the most intimate relationships people can have in this life is with a dying person. Grieving is the result of this relationship. It leads the person mourning to ask several hard questions about death. However, Buddhism explains that grieving can occur before or after death. People can anticipate the death of a close friend or relative and grieve with them before they die. Halifax calls it anticipated grief. It may also occur after the news of the death of a person. Those mourning experience a deep sense of loss and thus enter into a world of mourning (1).

A person can however choose how to mourn the dead. Even though modern Buddhism sees grief as a weakness, Buddhists can still choose how to express the sorrows of death. A good modern Buddhist has the option of mourning the dead through the expression of sadness, anger, anguish and crying.

However, traditional Buddhist explains that grieving may not bring a person back to life and therefore not useful. Instead, they proscribe that the best way to grief is to accept death peacefully and not to let the dead be disturbed by the mourning of the living. Letting go of the dead is a humbling experience that makes the dead to be our ancestors and thus part of us

(Halifax 3). The Buddhist believes one of Gautama Buddha's experiences informs this acceptance of death. A woman had lost her young daughter at an early age and thus experiences an unimaginable sense of loss. She grieved so much as she wanted her daughter back to life.

She could not accept death. However, Buddha had about her suffering and anguish and summoned her. The woman wanted Gautama Buddha to bring her daughter back to life.

Gautama reportedly agreed on condition that the woman would first bring to the Buddha, a seedling from a family that had not experienced death. The woman realized that death is a universal experience, as she could not find such a family. She thus accepted her daughter's death (Tang para 8).

The Buddhists have quite an elaborate ceremony to mark death. Tang explains that a dead person is allowed up to eight hours after dying before anyone touches them, as they believe that the spirit of a dead person lingers for a while and that it is important to give it time to be transitioned to the next realm. A dead body is treated with a lot of care so as not to anger the dead person's spirit (para 20). Religionfacts explains that the first ceremony is called "offering the cloths on behalf of the dead" and it involves monks assembling at the home of the deceased. They then offer the "Five Precepts" followed by the recitation of this well-known stanza: "

Impermanent are formations, subject to rise and fall. Having arisen, they cease; their subsiding is bliss." (para 10) Next the monks are offered "pamsukula," a new white cloth, which is torn and stitched back into a robe for the monks (para 11). The relatives of the dead sit together in a circle in

reverently, pouring water in a mug placed at the centre while the monks intone this ritualistic offering chant: “ Just as the water fallen on high ground flows to a lower level, Even so what is given from here accrues to the departed.

Just as the full flowing rivers fill the ocean, Even so what is given from here accrues to the departed.” (para 12) Three days after the funeral or cremation, *mataka-bana*, a burial rite that involves preaching by the monks in the house of the deceased is conducted. The monks gather at the homestead of the dead person and offer a preaching from the Buddhist creed concurrent with the occasion. After this preaching, the relatives of the dead recite the necessary quotations on death.

Later on refreshments are served to the bereaved and the monks are offered gifts (para 13). *Sanghika dana*, the Buddhist ceremony to give alms, is held three months after the death to remember the dead (para 14). The time when this prayer is held varies from society to society.

Some Buddhist communities may pray for up to seven years after death of a person. This duration of prayer is concurrent with the period of time the particular community believes life will take to reincarnate in the next realm (Tang para 21). Buddhism is such a liberal culture that it allows for both burial and cremation of the dead (Nye para 12).

This however, must be conducted within acceptable Buddhist norms and according to the wishes of the deceased. Cremation is the most acceptable form of disposing a dead body in many Buddhist cultures. Some communities cremate the dead together with their valuables, arguing that these

possessions will be useful in the next realm (para 14). However, Buddha did not proscribe the preferred ways of disposing ashes after cremation. He wanted people to understand that the body is just a physical form, void of any spiritual existence. After a person dies, the body would just return to the physical realms of nature. Thus most Buddhist either scatter the ashes to the sea or enshrine them in buildings (para 15).

In conclusion, Buddhism teaches people to accept death as part of nature. It consoles its adherents with the belief death is only the end of the physical body, that the spirit lives beyond death. Based on this precept, Buddhism therefore does not allow for grieving of the dead. This belief supports the idea of reincarnation into a different form depending on one's action when alive.

These actions determine what realm a person transits to after they die. The absolute wish for all Buddhist is to be reincarnated in nirvana, a world devoid of any physical suffering. This is usually the final destination for all people. However further studies should be conducted to establish several whether nirvana is achievable or not. It should also be established how a person's Karma liberates one from hell, the lowest realm.

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