



BUDDHISM

A Religion Adapts

Abstract

All religions change as they encounter cultural traditions in other countries. This paper examines how Buddhism has changed to meet the needs of adherents in different cultures.

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REL3180 Death, Dying, and Beyond

Overview

“Death presents and opportunity and a crisis for both the person approaching death and for the human community dealing with grief and loss,” according to Goss and Klass. These words were written about Buddhism, but they apply equally across humankind as death is the ultimate equalizer in that even money and the best medical care cannot prolong life forever. The other truism about religions is that they do not exist in a vacuum and each religion takes characteristics from the region it was born in and from the countries its adherents migrate to. **I really like the Buddhism chapter for how well it illustrates this.** In this paper, I’ll examine Buddhist beliefs and practices and how these beliefs and practices are influenced by the cultural beliefs and practices of the countries they are currently practiced in.

A religion’s beliefs about the afterlife influence the death rituals that adherents undertake and understanding their beliefs in the afterlife can help us to put context around their death rituals. For instance, cultures that believe in an afterlife such as the Taiwanese and Ancient Egyptians, often provide their dead with provisions for their journey to the afterlife. Some cultures, such as Christianity, also believe in the afterlife, but believe that ancestors will be provided for in the afterlife so no provisions are provided. **Interesting point, in a way it would be a negation of the concept of salvation through Christ.**

Buddhism was born when Siddhartha Gautama, who was born into a wealthy family, encountered death and suffering and renounced his privilege and became a forest dwelling ascetic. The Buddha believed that life is impermanent and that we are continually reborn until we are able to end our suffering and stop clinging to our sense of self. Once a person reaches this state of nirvana, a person’s mind will be purified and he/she will generate no karma and will be able to end the cycle of rebirth. “The Buddha refused to intellectually or ontologically define nirvana as he was primarily interested in its realization and not its definition,” according to Goss and Klass. Buddhists believe that mindfulness and becoming aware of the states of being can help lead to Nirvana and they also believe that Karma (i.e. that good actions have good effects and bad actions have bad effects) can contribute to better rebirths which can lead to transcendence or worse rebirths which will lengthen a soul’s journey to nirvana. **I can see why the Buddha would not focus on that because Nirvana is the total acceptance that having a self is an illusion, therefore you will not suffer because you are not clinging to the idea that some element of you is permanent. Basically a person can leave the cycle of rebirth because they can accept death as the end of consciousness. I think it is difficult to start there in the process of reforming a long standing religion.**

Buddhists use two stories to teach about Impermanence and grief. The first is the tale of Buddha’s own death. When the Buddha’s death was close, his cousin and close attendant Ananda was overwrought with grief and begged the Buddha not to enter nirvana. When Buddha did die, Ananda was berated by Buddha’s followers and said that it was his fault the Buddha did not live longer since as a sage the Buddha had the power to live as long as he desired. As Ananda was leaving, he realized that the Buddha had used his death to teach about impermanence and help Ananda achieve enlightenment. The second story illustrates how Buddhists use mindfulness to overcome grief. Goss and Klass relate the story of Kita Gosami who sought out the Buddha when her son died and asked him to bring her son back to life. The Buddha told her that he would be brought back to life if she could find a mustard seed from a house that had not suffered from death. She was unable to locate such a household and this helped her to overcome her grief and accept the inevitability of death **The story of Kisa Gotami is one of the things**

that students seem to remember long after the class is done. I get emails from former students experiencing a death who remind me of the story.

All cultures have customs to honor and mourn the dead and many of these customs are based on the idea that the relationship between the living and the dead does not end at death. Buddhists believe that not only can the good deeds an individual does during her life influence their karma and rebirth, they also believe that in the concept of merit transfer, which means that spiritual works performed by the living can aid the deceased in their journey toward rebirth. The idea of merit transfer is an offshoot of the idea of feeding hungry ghosts. During a meal at King Bimbisara's castle, hungry ghosts began making noise and the Buddha told the king that feeding the hungry ghosts would not help the ghosts, but that the merit the king gained by feeding Buddha and his disciples could assist the ghosts in their journey toward rebirth. As Goss and Klass said, "In this way, grief in Buddhism is redirected into compassionate acts for the benefit of the deceased." This idea further evolved as monks told laypeople that they could not help the dead directly, but that dead relatives would receive the merit if the living supported the monks. Although the idea of merit transfer was designed to help the dead on their journey in the afterlife, the cultural beliefs that the dead could harm the living were difficult to overcome and early Buddhist funerary rites incorporated scriptural "safety runes" to ward against ghosts and spirits. It is interesting that the concept of purgatory and intervention by priests on behalf of the dead is a similar belief. Aries brought up how this was practiced even more so earlier in history through donations and plaques that would remind the priests to pray for the dead.

Most Buddhists believe in the principles of rebirth, karma, and nirvana, but each branch of Buddhism has additional and sometimes contradictory beliefs and practices based upon the culture they live in. I will explore these in more depth below.

Thailand

Theavada Buddhist monks in Thailand dedicate themselves to attaining nirvana and easing their suffering through the practice of an eightfold mindfulness of death meditation and the contemplation of decaying corpses. The eightfold meditation guides the practitioner through a series of mindfulness exercises to help them confront and accept the reality of death, which is impermanence. The other practice requires the monk to meditate on a corpse to become familiar with the physical aspects of death, which Buddhists believe subvert desire and help devotees gain a sense of detachment about the world.

While monks devote themselves to obtaining Nirvana, lay Buddhists' beliefs are a blend of different cultures and religions including animism, Chinese Buddhism, and Hinduism. Yes, it is a common misconception that the lay people are doing what the monks do when students first get introduced to Buddhism. The spirits, who are considered members of the family in Thailand, figure heavily in lay Buddhists beliefs and offerings are often provided to appease them. The belief that the dead and the living can still interact plays heavily into rites for the dead. After a person is died, a coin is placed in their mouth to assist them in buying passage to the afterlife and relatives not only pay their respects to the dead, they also ask for forgiveness for any wrongs that they have done to the deceased as a way of freeing both themselves and their dead loved one from negative bonds. After the funeral, mourners

have a celebration to celebrate the end of suffering for the deceased and as a way to show the deceased that they do not need to worry about the living.

In addition to seeking their own enlightenment, Buddhist monks support the lay Buddhists in their beliefs by participating in funeral rites and chanting for the dead. They also perform rituals designed to help the dead on their way and mitigate any harm to the living from the dead. These rituals include chanting to tell the spirit the way to the afterlife and blessing the corpse before it is cremated. In addition to directly honoring the dead, these death rituals also allow the Thailand Buddhists to practice merit transfer as in return for the monks' services at the funeral, the family provides them with food, robes, and other gifts at the time of the funeral and at the three month and one-year anniversary of the death.

Japan

Ordinary Japanese Buddhists also believe that family ties extend beyond the grave and that the dead become ancestors who are revered as buddhas when they die instead of being reborn. **Yes, this was another shift to accommodate culture. There are some scholars who attribute the inability of Christianity to get a foot hold in Japan to the Japanese being unable to reconcile the concept of a focus on individual salvation over care for the family through the generations of living and dead.** The Japanese revere their ancestors and believe both that they are always available to provide guidance and support and that they journey to another realm and return during the summer festival of Obon where they are feted with singing and dancing before departing. Japanese death rituals are similar to those in Thailand as the first forty-nine days after death are considered to be a liminal time and space where the dead remain close. One of the key attributes of the first rituals for the dead during these forty-nine days are rituals designed to change the relationship between the living in the dead as the dead are formally informed that they are dead. Goss and Klass quoted one Japanese as saying that during this time the dead are told, "You are dead. You have to go away now. We regret that you have to go away, but you can't stay here." If the dead persist in staying and not moving on to become a buddha, the family may call in a priest who will reiterate to the deceased that they are dead and need to move along. Another key component of the forty-nine days is that it gives the living a chance to make amends with the dead and settle any outstanding issues or obligations.

Japanese Buddhists, like adherents of other branches of Buddhism, also believe in supporting the dead with merit transfer or in other ways. The Pure Land sect of Buddhism has a unique belief that the merit and compassion of Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, is enough for all adherents to enter the Pure Land where they will remain as ancestors for as long as anyone remembers them, which could be between thirty and fifty years. **This is significant as well, it is actually moving toward a salvation model rather than pursuing enlightenment through the four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path.** In addition to merit transfer, the Japanese also venerate their dead by placing their newly cremated dead into the same grave as their other ancestors so that they are all together. The Japanese believe that the spirits of their ancestors are always present at either the family shrine within their homes or at the grave. Another way that Japanese Buddhists support the dead is by having funeral rituals for wandering ghosts who were not honored at their time of death with a funeral. By holding these funeral rights for lonely ghosts, the Japanese believe that their spirits will be released and that they will not harm humans.

Tibet

Tibetan Buddhists, practicing in exile, have a concept called bardo or “in between” which refers to transitional states such as the moment of dying, the interim between death and rebirth, and the process of rebirth. They also believe that everyone has a “subtle mind” which travels through the bardo states. Death, for Tibetan Buddhists is viewed as both the maturation of karma, which is a belief shared with early Indian Buddhists, but also the separation of the life principle (bla) from the body. The *Bar-do thodol*, a Tibetan Buddhist sacred text, is used to guide the bla on its journey. As Goss and Klass state, “The *Bar-do thodol* describes in detail the experience of a person migrating from death to rebirth and is read to dying and deceased persons to guide them on their journey.” The reading of the Bar-do thodol not only aids the deceased on their journey, it also serves as a reminder to their loved ones of the importance of preparing for their own death. Often a lama or soul mother will serve as a psychopomp to aid the dead on their journey to rebirth. They do this by reading the *Bar Do thodol* in the presence of the dead body for forty-nine days and by performing the powa (transfer of consciousness) ritual where the dead are instructed on how to break the connection to the body. It is important that family members not show excessive grief during this period of mourning as excessive grief could confuse the dead and hinder the process of rebirth. **It is interesting that in both Islam and Buddhism excessive grief can harm the progress of the dead in their transition.**

Tibetan Buddhists also believe it is the duty of the living to aid the dead on their journey to the afterlife and they do this through merit transfers similar to those in other countries where monks are paid for their services in aiding the dead and by channeling their grieving energy into aiding the deceased. One way they do this is by supporting and communicating with the dead during the first forty-nine days by setting out food offerings for the dead in the morning and at night. Lamas also advise family members that they can support their deceased loved ones by practicing Powa and other rituals for the deceased. As Goss and Klass state, “By clearing the mind of grief, generating devotion, and visualizing awakened Buddhas and deities, the living actually assist the wandering bardo consciousness to realize its spiritual goal.” These practices not only allow the bereaved to transform their grief into energy to help the deceased, they also provide comfort for the living. Goss and Koss state that “the transmutation of grief into a compassionate letting go of the deceased continues the path of self-discovery of the luminous mind.”

American Community of Naropa

In the American Buddhist community of Naropa, beliefs about death, dying, and the afterlife are a melding of traditional Tibetan Buddhist beliefs with American cultural beliefs and this community focuses their death and dying rituals on cultivating a sense of compassion and communion with those who are dying and have just died. American Buddhists believe, according to Goss and Klass that “Making friends with death is a very direct way to understanding the First Noble Truth that the Buddha taught: all life is suffering.” American Buddhists in the Naropa community combine Tibetan Buddhist rituals with the practice of hospice to care for those whose death can be anticipated. As death approaches, a positive atmosphere is created and the dying person is surrounded by religious images and by family members and teachers who are meditating. Similar to the Tibetan practices of providing

instructions to the dying person, members of the Naropa community coach the person through the dying process. Although they do not sit with the corpse for the full forty-nine days, members do sit with the body for several days after the person has died to mediate and pray.

Oddly enough because the concept of merit transfer has little meaning for Americans, the Americans way of caring for the dead is more similar to practices that existed before Buddha had his fateful dinner with King Bimbisara. **Interesting insight!** American Buddhists do not perform good works for monks or others in hopes of gaining merit for their deceased ancestors, instead they care directly for the dead with acts of compassion and community. As Goss and Klass state, “That is, rather than seeking to gain merit, they cultivate a sense of compassion and thus a sense of communion with those who are dying and those who have just died.” This practice of Engaged Buddhism not only provides support for the dying, it also supports the Buddhists who are tending to them and helps them grow on the path of enlightenment. As Goss and Klass state, “In their engagement with hospice, the American lay Buddhists at Naropa take on the whole task at once as they give themselves fully to the care of the dying and take what insight and growth from it they are ready for at the time, or later as they reflect on the engagement.”

Summary

At the core of Buddhism is the teaching of impermanence and this remains even though Buddhism has changed and adapted to fit different cultures. The following are key ways that Buddhism has adapted:

- **Rebirth and Spirit Worship**—Religious leaders in the Buddhist traditions covered in this paper believe in rebirth and work to achieve nirvana. However, because the concept of ancestor veneration is so prevalent in Thailand and Japan, Buddhism in these countries has adapted to account for the cult of ancestor/spirit worship among lay people. In both of these traditions, they believe that instead of continually being reborn, spirits come back as ancestors who are available to aid and advise the living.
- **Merit Transfer**—In Ancient India, families directly provided for spirits with offerings of food. However, Buddhism introduced the concept of merit transfer where family members were encouraged to provide for monks and perform good deeds as a way of transferring merit to their deceased loved ones to help them achieve a better rebirth. In America where the concept of merit transfer does not have meaning, Naropa Buddhists are again caring directly for the dead and dying. **This is good stuff – I never considered that! How interesting to see a full circle.**
- **Engaged Buddhism**—In many Buddhist sects the monks and laity have very different roles, especially around the care of the dead and dying. However, in the American community of Naropa these roles are merged with lay people performing rituals that are reserved for monks in Tibetan Buddhism.

What I find interesting about the changes that have occurred in Buddhism and other religions as they spread from one region to another is that these changes happened before technology arrived to speed the spread of information from one region to another. While we have already seen the Internet used to help fund religious extremists, I wonder what changes we will see in religions as the Internet speeds the rate of their spread. **Technology and religion is definitely an interesting area for research and**

consideration. Once again, a pleasure to read. I loved the insight on American Buddhism, I usually consider it as quite a departure.