





# What Funeral Directors Should Know About . . . Buddhist Funeral Rituals

By Alice Adams

As the population of this state becomes rich with races and ethnic groups representing all parts of the world, Texas funeral directors are often called upon to arrange and direct services for families with varying religious backgrounds.

In the world today, there are eight major religions with thousands of varying dogmas in each category: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shinto and Taoism. All of these religions are being practiced in Texas today.

This article on Buddhism will be the first of several to explore the leading religions in Texas and their associated funeral rituals and traditions. There are more than 400 million followers in Buddhism today.

## **BUDDHISM IN AMERICA**

Founded in 500 B.C. in India, the practice of Buddhism as we know it in the United States remained fairly confined to communities of Japanese and Chinese immigrants until the end of the war in Vietnam. After that time, waves of Vietnamese immigrants came to the United States and to Texas. It was during the "beat" generation of the 1950s, however, that many Americans began embracing the teachings of Buddha and the practice of medita-

tion. With today's fast-paced lifestyles and the lack of immediate family support as family members move away from the traditional nuclear family boundaries, many people in the United States have discovered the peaceful philosophy of Buddhism.

In general, each sect of the religion has its own rituals and traditions, and there is no one particular order of service that can be applied to every Buddhist funeral ceremony. The following though are some general parameters to think about: 1. Most Buddhist services have three components: chanting, the burning of incense and post-funeral memorial services. 2. There are no specific rules regarding the disposition of human remains although cremation has been the tradition for many Buddhist families. 3. Flowers are not always sent but are common, particularly among Chinese Buddhists. Gifts of vegetarian food are appreciated. 4. If the services are not held at the crematorium, the casket is usually taken there at the end of the service. 5. Respects usually are paid to the family prior to the service. 6. Traditional Buddhist families will hold memorial services, usually in the family home or at the temple, seven days after the death and then every seventh day for 49 days. Anniversary services are observed by family and close friends and the third anniversary is significant as it marks

the end of a three-year period of grief for the decedent's family.

### **KADAMPA BUDDHISM AS PRACTICED IN THE WEST**

Kadampa Buddhism, first introduced in the West in 1976, offers teachings about Buddhism as well as lessons on how to practice meaningful meditation. Kadampa Buddhist Master Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso has worked to support the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) around the world, authoring more than 19 books on Buddhism and its meaning and establishing more than 500 centers and study groups, including several in Texas.

Gen Kelsang Dekyi, a Buddhist nun who teaches at the Chittamani Buddhist Center in Austin, said the NKT Buddhist service is, by comparison to other Buddhist services, quite short and may include prayers—called “Heartfelt Prayers”—and even hymns. A book, titled *Living Meaningfully, Dying Joyfully*, explains the NKT ritual in detail. The NKT Buddhist death ritual includes the importance of hav-

ing a close family friend or member of the family sit with the dying to say prayers that help the mind of the terminal patient to stay peaceful. “Prayers are said and are important, even if it appears the individual cannot hear them,” Gen Dekyi said.

Funeral services are held either in a chapel or a crematorium. But if the decedent or the surviving family prefers a Buddhist service, the gathering could be held in the crematorium, together with a service in the nearest Dharma Center. Generally, the resident teacher from a nearby Dharma Center will preside at the funeral service and the service, which follows. Flowers may be incorporated into the service, depending on the wishes of the family and the deceased.

Gen Dekyi added that there is no prescribed period of grief for the NKT Buddhist. “In some texts, it is said that prayers should be repeated daily for a period of 49 days after the death,” she added. “These prayers are to help the decedent's consciousness toward a good rebirth.” “Another service, called “powa” or “transference of consciousness,” is held after the for-

mal funeral service, which transfers the decedent's consciousness to a pure land,” Gen Dekyi explained. “This is a very detailed ceremony and uses a small photograph of the deceased and a small fire to burn sesame seeds. These seeds represent the decedent's negative karma to be purified by fire. The service is very beautiful, very light and very joyful for family and friends.”

### **JAPANESE BUDDHIST FUNERAL RITUALS**

Traditionally, in this sect, the family would wash the body after death. However, this task is now left to the funeral home. The body is then dressed and normal cosmetizing is allowed.

In traditional families, the eldest son is in charge of making funeral arrangements and choosing the day of the service. This individual is also in charge of the type of altar to be used, the flowers and fruits placed on the altar, food for guests attending the wake service, the funeral and the type of casket as well as other details.

After the body is prepared, close relatives stay with it (or nearby), and most relatives and close friends will wear black. Paper money is placed in the casket to pay toll over the River of the Three Hells, and a white headband is also placed in the casket, along with items the decedent enjoyed in life such as cigarettes and candy. The casket is then placed in front of the altars—in the funeral home or at home—and incense is burned. Some family members will want to offer incense, ring the altar bell and offer prayers.

At the funeral home, a table will be placed near the door on the day of the wake or the funeral so people arriving to pay their respects can be greeted. Some guests will bring condolence money in white envelopes. Those greeting guests write down each visitor's name and then present the family with the condolence money at the end of the service.

After greeting the family and offering condolences, those attending the wake will go to another room to enjoy the food and drink being served there. Traditionally those attending the wake do not attend the funeral and vice versa. When guests leave, they receive a small gift from the family as an expression of gratitude.

The funeral, held the day after the wake, includes the casket, placed before the

altar if the service is held at the funeral home. If the service is held at a temple, the casket is placed on the altar, along with a wooden tablet inscribed with the decedent's name. The presiding priest reads the sutra (discourse or sermon) and gives the signal to offer incense. Family members offer incense and visitors then come to the altar, bowing before putting a pinch into the incense urn. Everyone stands as the pallbearers carry the casket to the hearse.

Some of the more traditional families may want to accompany the body to the crematory and then go elsewhere to eat a catered meal. When the cremated remains are returned, the family may opt to keep them in the home until the 49th day. At that point, they may choose to place the remains in a niche or a family space.

### **CHINESE BUDDHIST DEATH RITUALS**

In the United States, most Chinese Buddhists allow the funeral home to pre-

pare, dress and cosmetize the body before putting it into refrigeration. Others want the body cremated immediately after death. Some families believe that the embalming chemicals may cause the deceased to suffer and will therefore delay First Call, so they decline embalming.

Followers of Tantra use a Dharani sheet—a piece of yellow silk with mantras printed on it—to cover the body. Others may offer Vajra sand, which is obtained from a holy place, blessed by a guru and then placed into small containers to be worn by the deceased. Still other families may want a Lama or practitioner to perform “Powa,” a practice that transfers the consciousness of the deceased to the Pureland. Others may offer vases to the protectors, asking for their escort, and some follow the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which gives guidance to the deceased, day by day.

A memorial service is usually slated and is often held at the funeral home. Some fam-

ilies prefer to set the date of the service by making calculations using the Chinese lunar calendar.

It is customary for all relatives and friends to attend the eulogy out of a show of respect. At one time, families or hired professional mourners wailed continuously during the service. In most families, this practice has been set aside. There are families who burn various kinds of paper currency called “hell bank notes”—usually paper with gold or silver foil glued to it—as offerings to the various deities. At the end of the ceremony and usually out of sight of family and other mourners, paper likenesses of the house, TV, car and utensils the decedent will need for the next life are placed in the casket.

Cremation or burial is a family choice. Some families will bury or store the cremated remains. Others prefer to have the cremated remains scattered in an ocean or river to develop karmic connections with those beings who feed on the ashes.