

ATTITUDE OF BUDDHISM WITH REGARD TO FUNERAL RITES

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One often comes across cases in this country of people who change their religion at the last moment when they are about to die and embracing another religion thinking that in doing so they could “wash out their sins” and seek an easy passage to heaven and also to ensure a simple and better burial. After having lived a whole life-time according to one religion and then embracing a religion which is totally unfamiliar to them and expecting a salvation through such new faith is indeed a very difficult thing to understand. To us this is only a dream. Not only that, some people are known to have been converted into another faith when they are in a state of unconsciousness and in some case even posthumously! Those who are overzealous and crazy of converting others into their faith mislead uneducated people into believing that theirs is one and only faith with such an easy method and short cut to heaven. If people are led to believe that there is someone hiding somewhere up who could wash out all the sins committed by them during their life-time then this will only indirectly encourage others to commit evil, for after all there is someone who could pardon all their sins.

According to the teachings of the Buddha however, there is no such belief that there is someone who could wash out sins. It is only when people sincerely realise that they are doing wrong and having so realised try to do more good thereafter, that they can suppress or postpone the reactions of any bad action they would have committed previously due to ignorance, misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Mere praying to someone to purify themselves without first suppressing the state of corruption in their own minds would have no meaning to a Buddhist.

Funeral Rites

A real Buddhist funeral is in fact the most simple and solemn ceremony as practised in many Buddhist countries. But some people have adopted so many unnecessary and expensive items and other superstitious practices according to their traditions and customs, introduced by ancient people who probably could not understand the nature of life and of what would happen to life after death.

With the mixing up of such ideas into Buddhist practices had led some people to blame Buddhism as saying that it is very expensive to perform a funeral according to Buddhist rites. If only the Buddhist public would approach Buddhist monks or lay devotees who have studied the real teachings of the Buddha, they could be assured of getting the correct instructions on how to perform the proper Buddhist funeral rites. It is very unfortunate if a bad impression is created that Buddhism encourages people to waste their money and time on unnecessary practices for it has to be clearly understood that true Buddhism has nothing to do with such practices.

Burial Or Cremation

Buddhists are not very particular regarding burial and cremation of a dead body although cremation is a customary thing in many Buddhist countries. From the Buddhist point of view it makes no difference to Buddhists whether the dead body is buried or cremated since they do not believe as in certain other religions that one day someone would come and awaken all the skeletons from their graveyards and decide as to who should go to heaven or to hell for good. Buddhists believe that when someone dies he will be reborn somewhere else immediately, according to his good or bad actions, either in this world or in any other world system as a human being, an animal, or in a spirit form, so long as he possesses the craving for existence. In the case of holy men like the Buddha and Arahants, who have annihilated all the passions from their mind, they will have no more rebirths and so attain their final goal – Nibbana - after death. Therefore, a departed person has no connection whatsoever with the dead body that he had left behind or his skeleton or his ashes. It is more advisable and appropriate for hygienic and economic reasons to resort to cremation. Today, the population in the world is increasing very rapidly and if we continue to have dead persons occupying land then one day all available land left would be occupied by the dead and the living will certainly have no place to live.

There are still some people who object to the cremation of dead bodies saying that it is against God's law, in much the same way as they had been objecting to many other things in the past. It will take some more time for such people to understand that cremation is much more appropriate and effective.