

How A Theravadin Buddhist Chinese Funeral May Be Conducted

Venerable Suvanno
with a forward by Ven. Visuddhācāra



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A Buddhist Funeral should be conducted in a simple, meaningful and dignified manner. The Theravadin Chinese Buddhist however is sometimes, if not often, bewildered as to how such a simple funeral may be effected. Such confusion may be cleared up if he considers the nature of death and rebirth as taught by the Buddha. This booklet attempts in a small way to shed some light on the subject, so the Theravadin Buddhist may discard blind and slavish adherence to superstitions and taboos that are incompatible with the Buddha's teachings. As in most things, knowledge and understanding is the key to dropping unsuitable rites and rituals and adopting, in their stead, skilful and meaningful practices.

Venerable Suvanno is a senior Theravadin Buddhist monk and teacher who has been actively spreading the Buddha's message of wisdom and compassion. And Venerable Visuddhācāra, in an afterword, offers his own very engaging thoughts on how his body may be unceremoniously disposed of after death.

*The days and nights are flying past,
Life dwindles hurriedly away,
The life of mortals vanishes
Like water in a tiny stream.*

— Buddha, *Samyutta Nikāya*

HOW A THERAVADIN
BUDDHIST CHINESE
FUNERAL
MAY BE CONDUCTED

BY

VENERABLE SUVANNO

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY VENERABLE VISUDDHĀCĀRA

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First Edition 1989

Revised Edition (edited by Visuddhācāra)

Published for free distribution by



• Touching Peace In Our Lives •

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Sukhi Hotu would like to express grateful acknowledgement and thanks to the sponsors of this booklet. May the merits gained by our kind sponsors be to their weal and happiness.

Enquiries for the sponsoring of Dhamma books published for free distribution by Sukhi Hotu may be directed to Sukhi Hotu at the above addresses.

Original Book & Cover layout & design: Lim Hock Eng

ISBN 983-9382-02-0

World Wide Web: <http://www.quantrum.com.my/sukhihotu/>

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PREFACE

I have often been asked how a funeral is to be conducted in the Buddhist way as most of us are confused in our hour of grief and loss. The confusion is compounded by the fact that there is no one way practised by the local Chinese community compared to those from a different religious faith. This is because we are guided by traditions and customs; a Hokkien funeral is somewhat different from a Cantonese one. Out of blind faith some follow whatever rites and rituals that are advised. Generally, a Chinese funeral is a mixture of Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist rites.

Capitalising on our love for the deceased, our fear of the dead, and our ignorance, “mercenaries” cash in on our weaknesses suggesting all sorts of things to be done. Friends and relatives, with good intentions or otherwise, play on our filial piety by offering all kinds of advice. As a result, unnecessary and exorbitant expenses are being incurred and useless rites and rituals are followed. Wrongfully thinking that we have to give the best to the deceased as if he or she is still alive, no amount of expense is spared to appease both the dead and the living.

How then should a Theravadin Buddhist Funeral be conducted? I have asked Venerable Suvanno, a respected and senior Theravadin Buddhist monk, to give us guidelines and I am indebted to him for his kindness in responding with this treatise.

Dhammadipa C. H. Wee
November 6, 1989



**How a
Theravadin Buddhist
Chinese Funeral
may be conducted**

Venerable Suvanno

**With an Afterword
by Venerable Visuddhācāra**

HOW A THERAVADIN BUDDHIST CHINESE FUNERAL MAY BE CONDUCTED

First, a few words about what to do before death. As a person is seriously ill and near death, it is good to invite one or more monks to the bedside to give a Dhamma discourse, to chant Buddhist suttas, and to give the Three Refuges and Five Precepts.¹ A Buddhist, having faith in his religion, would feel joy and comfort in seeing monks.

A Buddhist should try to keep his mind calm, peaceful, and mindful as he² approaches death. He should reflect on the good deeds that he has done and arouse confidence that these deeds would give him a good rebirth and support him in his next life. He should accept death as a natural and inevitable phenomenon, reflecting that all of us come according to our kamma and we have to go according to our kamma. By gracefully letting go and accepting death, he would expire peacefully and hopefully gain a good rebirth in the heavenly realms or, if he returns to the world, he may be born to good parents and be an intelligent human being.

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1. Buddhists go for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and undertake to keep the five precepts. [See page 38](#) for the Pali wordings and translation.
 2. For convenience, we use the masculine pronoun “he”. But it should be understood that whenever we use “he” in a general context, we mean “he” or “she”. No gender discrimination is intended.

In view of the fact that we are owners of our kamma, it is important that while we are alive we do a lot of good deeds and live a wholesome life so that we may be assured of a happy rebirth on death. Of course, the final aim of all Buddhists is to attain Nibbana, which is the end of all rebirth. But until we uproot our mental defilements of greed, hate and delusion, we would still have to sojourn in *saṃsāra*, the rounds of birth and death.

Though it is understandable that there will be grieving and sorrow at the time of death, it is good for family members to restrain themselves from weeping and wailing before the dying person. This is because such tears and emotion will only upset the dying person making it more difficult for him or her to depart. One should allow a person to go peacefully, understanding that when one's time has come one has to go. Undue clinging and attachment will only conduce to more suffering. In fact, family members may assure the dying person that he need not worry about them, that he should keep his mind calm and peaceful, and that it is all right to go when his time has come. In this way, the dying person too may feel relieved and may expire peacefully.



When a person has died, the body should be cleansed and dressed. A simple and neat attire will do. Jewellery and ornaments, real or imitation, should not be worn. This is because the deceased has already taken rebirth and would not be able to take anything along with him.

As for the casket, it need not be expensive. It may be moderately priced or, if one is poor, a cheaply priced one will do as well. An understanding Buddhist would not want his family members to incur unnecessary expense. He would instead prefer that *dāna* or charity be done with the money that is saved through having a simple funeral.

A photograph of the deceased may be put before the casket. Flowers and wreaths may also be placed around the casket. Dhamma wordings, such as the last words of the Buddha: *All conditioned phenomena are subject to dissolution. Strive on with diligence for the liberation from suffering*, may be put up as a form of edification and inspiration, so we may reflect and live meaningful lives.

There are many Chinese funeral traditions and taboos presently being adhered to in Chinese funerals. However, a Chinese Buddhist who wishes to hold a purely Theravadin Buddhist funeral, should discard many of these practices. With no disrespect or offence meant to those who wish to follow traditional Chinese funeral rites and rituals, the following advice is meant only for those who wish to follow a Theravadin Buddhist funeral: There is no need for the Theravadin Buddhist to burn joss paper; no need to place a basin of water and towel under the casket (because the deceased can't possibly make use of this); no need to place a bowl of rice with chopsticks in front of the casket (because he can't partake of the food); no need to burn joss-sticks or candles before the casket; no need to hang a mosquito netting over the casket; no need to place decorative lightings around the casket; no need to distribute red threads to those who

attend the funeral; doors may be closed at night when visitors have left, so family members may take a rest; after the funeral, there is no need to hold a house cleansing ceremony to ward away bad luck as this is just a superstitious practice; so too there is no need to wash one's face with "chanted" water because the Buddha has taught us that we should always have confidence in our own selves, that is, in our practice of the Dhamma, our practice of *dāna* (generosity), *sīla* (morality) and *bhāvanā* (meditation). The Buddha taught that our true refuge or protection lies in the good kamma we create by doing good deeds, keeping precepts and meditating. Thus, if we have followed the Buddha's teachings in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path, we would already have had the best and true protection, and we should not at all resort to superstitious and un-Buddhistic practices.

We would encourage simplicity and wisdom, remembering that the deceased would already have taken rebirth, and if he had been a knowledgeable Theravadin Buddhist, he too would have wanted to do away with meaningless procedures.

Thus, there is no need at all for the burning of paper houses, paper cars, "hell" money, and other paper paraphernalia, together with the conducting of various rites and rituals, as all these would cost an astronomical sum of money which would be wholly wasted, as the deceased would not be able to benefit from any of these procedures. According to Theravada Buddhism, it is not possible that what is burnt here can materialise in another world. What is burnt just stays burnt. And it is also not possible, according to Theravada Buddhism, that the spirit can be guided from hell or some such location to

heaven. Rebirth, in Theravada Buddhism, is instantaneous upon death, and the nature of the rebirth would depend generally on the kamma or deeds done by the person while he was alive. Thus, the importance of living a virtuous life can never be over emphasized, for when we die we can't expect to be "saved" by rites and rituals and the like.

The money that is saved from the abandoning of unbeneficial rites and rituals can instead be used to do *dāna*, offerings of requisites to monks and temples, and donations to charitable institutions in memory of the deceased. So too, the family of the deceased can request that in lieu of wreaths, friends and relatives may make donations to charitable institutions. The merits made could then be dedicated to the deceased and to all beings.

There is no need for family members to wear specially made black or coarse (*boon tar*) mourning clothes. One could wear ordinary clothes, or wear white, or some grey or plain sober colour, to reflect the sombreness of the occasion. In Buddhism, we are taught by the Buddha to accept the fact of death, and not to mourn and lament. Crying and weeping, the Buddha said, would not bring back the dead but would only cause the living more suffering.³

This, of course, does not mean that we should suppress or deny our grief. We are, as yet, not Buddhas or arahats who do not feel sorrow any more. So, what we can do is to be mindful, to acknowledge the sorrowful feelings that arise in us. We can shed tears. We can grieve. But through mindfulness

3. Please refer to story of the Buddha's previous life in [Appendix \(III\), page 54](#).

and wise contemplation, we won't be overwhelmed by our sorrow. We can bear up gracefully, calmly. And we can reflect that the Buddha taught us that there is no permanent self or soul here. Ultimately, we do not even own ourselves. We are conditioned by ignorance and craving which create kamma which leads us on to rebirth.

The understanding Buddhist, reflecting on the teachings of the Buddha, and contemplating on the Four Noble Truths, would be further resolved to tread the Noble Eightfold Path to make an end of rebirth and suffering. He would be resolved to practise generosity, keep the five precepts, and undertake the practice of mindfulness and meditation to uproot mental defilements.



There is also no need for family members to turn their backs towards the casket when the deceased's body is being placed into it, or when the casket is being taken from the house to the hearse on the day of the funeral. There is no cause at all for the Theravadin Buddhist to observe such a practice which would, to our mind, be rather disrespectful or hurtful to the deceased should he have been able to observe what was going on. Instead the family members may stand, observing in respectful silence, as the casket is taken out of the house. They can reflect on the mortality of the human condition — how all of us must one day die and how important it is for us to be kind and live a meaningful life while we are alive. Of course,

they can also radiate good wishes to the deceased, wishing that he or she may be happy in his or her new rebirth.

Another out-of-place practice in the Theravadin context is the offering of food such as chicken, duck, roasted pork and vegetables before the deceased, especially at the time of paying the last respects normally observed in traditional Chinese funerals. Such offering is unnecessary because the deceased has taken rebirth and would not be able to partake of such food.

The practice of engaging a band to play some solemn music during the funeral procession is optional. It is just as well if one wishes to observe noble silence.

Burial or cremation is optional, though the latter would be more practical, less expensive, and preferable. What remains of the body after death is but a shell, the person having taken a new rebirth. And how long, one may ask, should the body be kept? Cremation or burial can be done promptly, such as on the following day, or even on the same day. However, a family may want to keep the body for several days for various reasons, such as to await the return of distant family members, or to allow relatives and friends to call to pay their last respects. Thus, the decision to bury or cremate as soon as possible, or to keep for a few days, is left to the discretion of the family members, or to the wish of the deceased if he had stated his desire before his death.

After cremation, what should one do with the ashes? The Chinese have a practice of placing the ashes in an urn in a columbarium. Myanmar Theravadin Buddhists normally leave the ashes behind at the crematorium for the attendants

to dispose of, though some family members may also opt to collect the ashes and discard them into the sea or river. For the Malaysian Theravadin Buddhists, we would say (i) placing the ashes in a columbarium, (ii) leaving them behind together with the other remains for the crematorium attendants to dispose of, or (iii) discarding the ashes into the sea or river are all optional. If one opts for memorial purpose to place the ashes in a columbarium, there is no need to make any offerings or perform any rites or rituals over the urn containing the ashes. This is because the deceased has already taken rebirth and what is left is just ashes. Instead of performing meaningless rites, one could instead offer *dāna* at the temples and share the merits with the deceased.

Leaving the ashes behind or strewing them into the sea or river is also fine. For, as we have said, what is left are just remains, just elements of earth, water, wind, and fire. The person is not the bones or ashes. His consciousness has departed and taken rebirth in a new form. Thus, his ashes may be discarded, without any disrespect at all to be construed by any party. The Buddha's teaching is one of wisdom and non-attachment. What we should do is to treat each other lovingly while we are alive, and after a loved one has passed away, we should continue to live a good life such that the deceased, if he could have been aware, would have been proud of us, proud that we are living a good life in accordance with the Buddha's teachings.



If the body is kept for a few days before burial or cremation, monks (one or more) may be invited to the house to give a Dhamma discourse, to do some chanting of the Buddhist suttas, and to give the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. Buddhist friends can visit and do some chanting, too⁴ They can also sit around and do some meditation in a group or hold a Dhamma discussion. There could be a special reading of the Dhamma from the scriptures. One could select appropriate and edifying Buddhist texts for the occasion.⁴ Family members and friends can also give orations, recollecting the kind deeds and good nature of the deceased. Thus, as one can see, it is up to each family concerned to conduct or initiate a meaningful kind of gathering and service. We can be creative and innovative in conducting a meaningful service as a form of paying honour to the deceased.

On the day of the funeral too, a monk or monks may be invited to do some chanting and to give the five precepts, after which they may also lead or follow the hearse in a separate car to the burial site or crematorium. Usually, there is a custom of offering robes to the monks as a form of merit-making. Family members may offer the robes to the monks either at the house before departure for the crematorium, or on arrival at the crematorium. The robes may be placed on top of the casket for the monks to remove as *paṃsukula* (discarded) robes or they may be offered directly to the monks. There is no hard and fast rule for many of these procedures.

4. Verses for Pali chanting and contemplation can be found in [Appendix \(I\)](#) and [\(II\)](#) of this booklet.

One can adjust and modify, accordingly. After the robe offering, the monks will lead the family members in the sharing of merits with the deceased and with all beings. At the burial site or crematorium, the monks will also do a short chanting before the casket is lowered into the ground or conveyed into the cremation chamber.

Usually, the chanting is concluded with the following verse:

*Aniccā vata sankhārā
Uppāda-vaya-dhammino
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti
Tesam vupasamo sukho.*

Impermanent are all conditioned things.
Of a nature to arise and pass away.
Having arisen, they pass away.
Their calming and cessation is true bliss.⁵

The *calming and cessation* here refers to the attainment of arahathood — the highest stage of Buddhist sainthood. An arahat, having uprooted all craving, undergoes no more rebirth. If there is rebirth there will be dying again. If there is no rebirth, there is no more death. That cessation of rebirth is the cessation of suffering. It is true bliss.

5. If no monk is available, a family member, relative, or close friend may recite this verse at the crematorium. Other relevant suttas, such as the Paṭicca Samuppāda (see page 44) or Salla Sutta (The Dart: see page 52) may also be recited.

SHARING OF MERITS

Sharing of Merits is a Buddhist tradition. After doing some good deeds, such as the offering of robes and food to monks, taking of precepts, making of donations, and so forth, the Buddhist dedicates the merits to the deceased person and to all beings, wishing that all beings may become enlightened, that they may exit from *saṃsāra*, that they may attain Nibbana, the end of rebirth and suffering. Dedication of merits is a good practice. It brings out the noble and selfless heart in us, the wish that our merits may, if possible, contribute to the enlightenment of all beings.

Can the merits we make really be shared with or transferred to another person? Can a deceased person receive our merits? According to the Tirokudda Sutta, a discourse given by the Buddha, merits may be shared with hungry ghosts. If a person is reborn a hungry ghost, he may still be around. Thus, if he is around and he rejoices over the good deed that has been done on account of him, then that act of rejoicing is itself a meritorious deed. And for the hungry ghost who has no other way of making merits, this act of rejoicing is a significant merit that can alleviate his suffering in the ghost world, and hopefully bring about for him a speedy new rebirth into a happier realm. So, from here we can see that one needs to be aware in order to rejoice and, so to speak, “share” in the merits made. Thus, if one is reborn as an animal or a human being, one would be in the womb of one’s mother and would not be able to be aware of merits made by family members of one’s previous life. So too if one is reborn in hell, for beings in

the hell realm are, according to Theravada Buddhism, not in a position to be aware of what is going on in the earth realm. It would also appear that *devas* in the heavenly realms would generally be similarly unaware. Perhaps the devas would be too preoccupied with their happy activities in their realms to be concerned about what we are doing here. Besides, there is a difference in time span. According to the scriptures, a day in some deva realm is equivalent to some fifty years on earth!

So, we would think that generally only hungry ghosts may be aware of the merits made by relatives on account of them. Besides ghosts, we may venture to say that perhaps certain low earth-bound devas or spirits may also be aware since such spirits are said to reside in rocks and trees.

Of course, we would not want our loved ones to be reborn as hungry ghosts in order to receive our merits! We wouldn't want them to be in need of any such merits. Instead, we would want them to get a happy rebirth on death — to become human beings or *devas*, heavenly beings. But in the event that such an unfortunate rebirth as a hungry ghost should have occurred to our loved ones, then the sharing of merits may be beneficial to them, if they should be present or become aware of our act or thought of sharing. Also, besides the deceased person, we can also share merits with all our departed relatives of this and previous lives. So, besides the immediate deceased person, other departed relatives who perchance could have become hungry ghosts, might be able to rejoice and benefit, too.

From the aforesaid discussion, one can see how important it is to live a good life while we are alive — to practise

generosity, keep precepts, and do meditation; for our rebirth will be dependent on the deeds we do while we are alive.

Finally, the merits we made are ours. The “sharing” with the deceased and all beings does not mean our merits are halved or lessened. We still get our due. Instead, the act of sharing itself is a meritorious deed. Thus, the dedication of merits towards the enlightenment of all beings is a good tradition that brings out the nobility and selflessness in us.

Theravadin monks do not charge any fees for their service. It is all done free, as part of their service to the community, or as a form of giving moral support to the family of the deceased. So, the monks do not at all expect any payment. It is, however, a custom among the Chinese to offer red packets (*angpows*) as an expression of appreciation. If such is offered, a monk may accept the donation and use it in an allowable way, such as for the obtainment of requisites he needs, or for Dhamma work, such as the printing of Dhamma books for free distribution.

The Chinese have a practice of performing certain rituals and prayers on the seventh day, 49th day, and 100th day after and on the anniversary of the deceased’s death. The Theravadin Buddhists should not, of course, follow rituals which are not in accord with the Dhamma. Instead, what the family can do, if they like, is to offer food and other requisites to monks at the temple so that merits may be shared with the deceased. Or they can do some good or noble deed, such as feeding the hungry, printing Dhamma books for free distribution, etc., in the hallowed memory of the deceased.

Yet another practice which should not be done by the Theravadin Buddhist is the holding of a spiritual seance (Hokkien: *khan-bong*) through a medium to recall the “spirit” of the deceased. This is because such a practice is incompatible with Theravada Buddhist teachings. No one can say for certain where a person is reborn and furthermore, apart from the ghost world and earth-bound deva plane, communication with reborn beings in any other realms is generally out of the question.



In conclusion, we would reiterate that a Theravadin Buddhist funeral can be carried out in a simple manner, doing away with unnecessary spending, and meaningless rites and rituals. It is up to responsible family members to initiate a meaningful funeral service instead of letting professional undertakers dictate to them. Remember we can be innovative and creative with an emphasis on meaning and understanding.

Donations too can be made to temples and charitable institutions in memory and honour of the deceased. The merits made can then be dedicated to the deceased and to all beings.

May all beings become enlightened and attain Nibbana, the end of rebirth and suffering.



AFTERWORD

HOW MY BODY MAY BE DISPOSED OF

BY VISUDDHĀCĀRA

I am normally saddened when I attend a Chinese Buddhist funeral. Not because someone has died but because of the many un-Buddhistic elements incorporated into the purportedly Buddhist funeral. No doubt, we are saddened by the loss of our loved ones, but why must we add, so to speak, further insult to injury, by succumbing out of fear and ignorance to all kinds of questionable rites and rituals?

The answer, of course, is because of our fear and ignorance. I am addressing this afterword to the Theravadin Buddhist. Let me make it clear from the outset that I mean no disrespect to those who subscribe to other faiths or beliefs. All are fully entitled to practise their own rites and customs. This is our inalienable right.

But here I am addressing the Theravadin Buddhist and I am saying that if we understand our Theravadin Buddhist teachings, then we can dispense with a lot of fear and ignorance, and we can do things, such as conducting a funeral, in a simple, dignified and meaningful manner — which is not the way I see it generally happening now for us Theravadin Buddhists. (There would be some exceptions, of course.)

When I see professional funeral undertakers dictating to members of the bereaved family, relatives and friends, I am even more saddened and astounded. Why should these rude people dictate to us? Why should they shout and yell at us

(sometimes through a loud hailer!): Do this! Do that! Come here! Take joss sticks and pray now! Kneel! Bow three times. Get up! Turn your back away (from the coffin), don't look, and so on, without a *by your leave*, a *please* or in other words, simple basic courtesy. And why must we meekly and obediently follow or submit? Who is conducting the funeral? Us or them? Is it the funeral of our or their loved one? Who are they? Are they Theravadin Buddhists? Do they understand Theravada Buddhism? Do they understand anything? Have we lost all control? Have we no control?

It seems we have not, that is to say, it seems we have no control, or rather, we don't exercise our right to control. In that sense we have lost all control, and with that, we have lost or surrendered all our sense of meaning and dignity. We just do not know what to do. We are quite helpless and lost. I have seen it many times — intelligent and respectable people surrendering all their rights and understanding to these undertakers who may be smoking and laughing, speaking roughly and dressed quite scruffily. To the undertakers, I suppose it is all in a day's work, capitalising on our fear and ignorance. Of course, there may be some good and sincere undertakers who may mean well and who may carry out their duties politely and well, but I am afraid the impression I have in Penang with traditional Chinese funerals has so far been very bad and negative.

There is no grace, no meaning, no dignity. I hope, therefore, that this little book you have now in your hands will help us to re-think and regain some form of control. I hope we will start to question and to find a meaningful kind of dis-

posal or sending-off for ourselves and our loved ones. This booklet is, of course, not the last word on the subject. It is just a beginning. There are many more points to be explored and discussed. And a lot of procedures or things we can do are highly subjective and personal depending on the desires and preferences of the party concerned.

For example, for me, I don't even need a funeral or an obituary in the newspaper. After all, I am not going to be around to inspect or observe what is going on after I die. I would just get reborn, though my life's goal is to strive towards the extinction of birth and death. I can happily donate my whole body away if there is any institution that can take and use it — a hospital or a university medical faculty. I will be glad to donate away any or all of my organs upon death. What use is the body to me after death? If it can be of use to somebody, why, I'll be really glad to be of such "post-use" to my other living fellow creatures. And after the doctors or medical students have dissected and removed whatever parts of me that can still be used, they can dispose of the remains in whatever manner they like. Bury it in some unknown spot. Burn it. Whatever, it doesn't matter at all to me.

You see, to me the body is then like old clothes. When we die, it is like shedding our old clothes and taking new clothes, or rather new bodies or forms, in a new rebirth or life, according to kamma; that is, according to the deeds we have done in this life. That is why it is important for me to live a good life in this life while I am alive. After death, there is no need to be attached to the body. All the rites and ceremony would actually not be for the dead (since the dead cannot see

or know what is going on anymore) but for the living — to help make the living feel better, to help them go through a grieving process. But is that necessary? That, of course, is subjective. Some people like some meaningful rites and service while some like the minimum of fuss or, as in my case, I would like to have no fuss at all, and would happily dispense with a funeral. I would make life easier for a lot of other people. They need not be troubled on my account. They need not walk for some hundred yards in the hot sun and sweat on my account.

Yes, if they want to remember or honour me, I would always say, do some good deed, live a good life, keep the five precepts, be kind to your fellow human beings while they are alive — not when they are dead and you can't do anything for them anymore. Though, of course, you can still come, console and give moral and physical support to the bereaved family members.

If I were to have a funeral, I would like people to do something meaningful. For example, my Buddhist friends could gather and meditate around my casket by way of honouring me, since I pride myself as being a meditator and have always encouraged people to meditate. Of course, I wouldn't be around to watch them meditating (I don't think I'll be reborn a suffering ghost! — though, of course, you never can tell!). It is not so much as an honour they do me but what I am happy about is that they get to do something meaningful like doing Vipassana (Insight) meditation or reflecting on death, on our mortality, on our need to live wise, loving and meaningful lives, and on the importance of striving through

meditation to uproot the mental defilements of greed, hate and delusion, so we will never have to be reborn again, and if there is no birth there will be no decay and death. Finished — in this way, as the Buddha taught, the whole cycle of suffering comes at last to a halt.

Besides meditation, they can discuss the Dhamma, read something inspiring and meaningful from the scriptures, sing Buddhist hymns on impermanence, suffering and not-self, or give some orations about me. Of course, in making orations, they don't have to only praise me — they can speak honestly about both my good and bad qualities. We are definitely not perfect. We have our failings and shortcomings — we have our fair share of attachment, pride, anger and delusion. So, they can say: "Visuddhacara was generally a nice bloke, a kind, understanding and patient sort of fellow (as I would like to vainly think of myself), but he could get angry sometimes when he didn't get his way. He could snap at you without his realizing it. He could be very vain, mean and bigoted (as he is now). I wonder where his mindfulness went then? As he had made quite number of people happy in his life, he had also equally upset quite a few who might not even have forgiven him to this day. Ah, such is the irony and tragedy of life! How we meant well and bungled all along the way.... And when it came to editing, he was very particular about even a full stop and a comma, and he could get upset when he saw things not properly edited. And after all these years as monk he was not, ahem, beyond attachment to having favourite cup of coffee and tea. I am afraid he was still a fool which he himself readily admitted when he was alive. And regretfully he would,

therefore, have to undergo some more rebirths before he can become enlightened. Better luck for you in your new birth, Reverend.”

And so on and so forth. I wouldn't mind. And even if I would, I wouldn't be around to mind! And of course, people can have a few laughs, shed a few tears, and learn something. For I always follow this simple dictum: “If you know or hear of somebody doing good or behaving in an admirable and commendable way, say ‘hurray’ and follow her example. And if you know or hear of somebody doing bad or behaving in an obnoxious manner, say to yourself ‘Oh, I'd better not do this. I'd better not behave like that fellow.’” In this way, you learn both ways — both from the good and the bad. You resolved to follow the good and to shun the bad. Both good and bad can teach us.



If I were to have a casket, I would say don't bother to buy me one. Why waste the good money? Why spend so much on something you are going to burn away, and which looks much too polished and flashy to me? I don't think I'll be comfortable sleeping in a casket like that. Just knock five pieces of wood together and put a cover over it. That would be fine for me. Save the money, use it for some needy or better purpose, or, give it away to charity. Or you can ask my good friend, Ah Soak, the carpenter. I am sure he wouldn't mind knocking some old pieces of wood together for me. And knowing him, he probably would refuse to accept any form of payment. Tell

him it is my express instruction that I don't want anything expensive or fancy. Something neat and simple. Even a cardboard box will do if the crematorium will accept it. After all, during the Buddha's time, monks used to pick up old rags from the road and make them into robes for wearing.

Sometimes, I think it is a good idea to make your own home-made and simple casket *now* and to place it in your room. You can use it temporarily to put in your stuff, such as your old books, clothes or belongings. Then, every day when you look at the casket, you have a very good reminder. You will remember: "Look, Visuddhacara, you have to die one day. That's your casket over there. One day they are going to put you in it. What are you doing now? Are you still quarrelling with people? Are you still being petty and small-minded? Living with small mind instead of big mind? Life is too short for pettiness, you know. There are many other more important and better things to do. Now, remember what did you become a monk for? To quarrel? To get angry? To get more mad and vain? Have you forgotten what you become a monk for, all your monkish ideals? To be kind, understanding, patient and loving? And especially to meditate to eliminate all mental defilements, to get out of samsara, to get to Nibbana, to make an end of rebirth and suffering?"

Or sometimes when I am feeling awfully depressed, disappointed or upset, I can look at my casket and I can tell myself: "It is all right, Visuddhacara. Cheer up! Life is short and soon we will all be dead. You'll be lying in that casket one day, never fear, and it'll be all over — this weary business of living. Be patient."

Except, of course, I know we'll get reborn and will have to face this messy business of living all over again, though we would hope to do it better next time round; wouldn't we?

Or perhaps, sometimes, I could just go and lie quietly in the casket. Lying in it and reflecting on death may make me more humble and less arrogant. It may arouse in me the urgency to strive even harder to make an end of rebirth and suffering.

So, you see, reflecting on death can be a good meditation if you know how to do it skilfully. It is bitter but good medicine recommended by the Buddha. We should reflect on our mortality every day, so we can give up hatred, anger, pride and selfishness, so we can live with more love, compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and wisdom.



And if I couldn't give away my body (in case nobody wants it), I would opt to be cremated. And if cremated, I would say: please don't ever collect my ashes and keep them in an urn in a columbarium or anywhere. Why on earth should you do that? Why should you bother about my remains. It is not me. I am not there, in that urn. I have been reborn, taken on a new body, a new form, like exchanging old clothes for new clothes — until such time when I can become an arahant (ah — when will that day be?) and never be reborn again. So you can leave behind the ashes at the crematorium. Tell the crematorium attendants to dispose of them together with the burnt wood and bones that they would normally have to get rid of,

anyway, since you can't possibly collect and put everything in an urn. Tell them they can dispose of them any way they like. You are not going back to collect them. That's all. So simple and neat. And that's the way the Myanmar Buddhists do it, too. No need even to throw the ashes into the river or sea. It's a lot less inconvenience and is uncomplicated for everybody this way. Remember, keep it simple; there are enough complications in life already without us having to unnecessarily add to them.

And as for a funeral, I am going to do away with a lot of stuff. I don't want any fancy, ugly, cheap, soiled, recycled decorations and lighting around my casket as some undertakers may offer. There is no need to put up anything as far as I am concerned. I do not believe in any taboos or superstitions. I am not going to have a miserable looking hired musical band and people walking in the hot sun and suffering on my account and all that. I don't want my body to be kept any number of days. Cremate it on the same day if possible without any fuss. No need to inform anybody or let anybody know (except of course for the police for, it seems, you need a death certificate from them for burial or cremation purposes). Just dispose of me quietly. Get it over with quickly. Put my body in a simple box. Somebody with some pieces of wood and nails can quickly put one together. Ah Soak, if he is still around, can do it. Then, if possible, no need to hire a hearse. Just ask a friend with a small van and, if he doesn't mind, to put my box with me in the van and drive to the crematorium. No fuss, no hue, no cry, no funeral, no mourning. Just ask the crematorium attendants to put the box in the incinerator.

No big gathering, no service. It is not necessary. And the few friends who fetched my body there, can walk away, and they don't even have to look back and get sentimental. It's only a silly old monk that died (if I died not too old, then a silly not-too-old monk that died).

Alternatively, of course, I can plan a meaningful funeral service for myself and ask a friend to conduct it for me, since I wouldn't be around to conduct it myself. I could have something read out. My last testament. Urging people to do good, to have time for each other, to simplify our lives, cut down on our desires, to be kind, to give to charity, to be generous, to meditate, to live a good life, and all that. I can apologise to the people I hurt. Ask them to forgive me. Tell them I didn't mean to hurt them, and all that. My last preaching — lying there dead — from a box! How obnoxious — the preaching I mean. Even in death, he wants to preach. But that would give some kind of dramatic effect, wouldn't it? I would remind all present of our common mortality. I would say: Look here, don't be smug and think it won't happen to you. One day, you too will be lying here, dead in a box like me. Have you practised enough Dhamma? Have you made enough provisions for your next life? Have you made good kamma? Have you given? Have you loved? Have you learnt to forgive? Have you learnt to let go? And things like that.

So, as you can see, with regards to a funeral, there is no hard and fast rule. It is all up to you how you would like it to be conducted. What I mean to say is that you don't have to listen to the professional undertakers or follow their dictates if you don't want to. Think about it — how you would like

your own funeral conducted? And just as you would like to have such a funeral, would you not like to provide the same for a departed loved one should he (or she) not have left instructions or indicated what kind of funeral he desired?

As for our own funeral, wouldn't it be a good idea too, to give clear instructions when we are alive? We could delegate to someone we trust the responsibility of seeing that our instructions are carried out. Or better still, we can put all our instructions down in writing, so that there would be no confusion or dispute after we had died.

You don't, of course, have to follow all or any of my ideas. I know some of these ideas can sound wild and extreme to you or some people. Furthermore, we cannot all have the same preferences. We come from different backgrounds and different situations in life. And what is meaningful to one may not be meaningful to another. It is, as we have said, a highly subjective and personal matter. But remember, it is your funeral, your body, you have a right to decide how you want it done, even down to whether you want a funeral or you don't want one. That's your right, and everybody, including your family members, has to appreciate, respect and understand this right of yours, just as you would appreciate, respect and understand their rights when it comes to their body and their funeral.

I am afraid this afterword is becoming longer than I had expected. I can get quite carried away when I begin to write. I would like to apologise if I have stepped on the sensitivities of any party. It is not my intention to do so. Please do not be offended. I always respect the rights of others to follow

their preferences. So here I am addressing my opinion only to fellow Theravadin Buddhists, and it is only my opinion, albeit based on my experience as a Theravadin Buddhist monk and my understanding of the Buddhist teachings; nobody of course need accept my opinion or my interpretation of the Theravadin Buddhist teachings. Feel absolutely free to dissent or to differ.

In conclusion, I would like to express my profound thanks and appreciation to Ven. Suvanno for so graciously giving me the liberty to edit and revise his earlier booklet. To me, Ven. Suvanno is one of the most compassionate of monks who always responds to the spiritual needs of the Buddhist laity, visiting the sick and dying. Despite his age, he is untiring in giving Dhamma talks, in encouraging people to practise generosity, to keep precepts and to meditate. Any mistakes or inaccuracies in the editing and revision of this booklet are solely mine, for which I ask for forgiveness. However, I would be happy if this booklet has helped to enlighten in some small way the Theravadin Buddhist or anybody who finds the views expressed herein refreshing, compatible and encouraging to them.

Visuddhācāra,
August, 1996



QUICK, STRIVE!

*Like a withered leaf are you now.
The messengers of death wait on you.
On the threshold of decay you stand.
Provisions too there are none for you.*

*Make an island unto yourself.
Strive quickly, become wise.
Purged of stain,
and passionless,
you will not come again to
birth and death.*

Buddha, *Dhammapada* 235 & 238

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VANDANĀ

HOMAGE

*Namo tam bhagavato arahato
sammāsambuddhassa. (3x)*

Honour to Him, the Exalted, Worthy, and
Fully Enlightened. (3x)

TISARANA

THE THREE REFUGES

*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

I go for refuge to the Buddha.
I go for refuge to the Dhamma.
I go for refuge to the Sangha.

*Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Dutiyampi Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

(For the second time I go for refuge...)

*Tatīyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Tatīyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.
Tatīyampi Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi.*

(For the third time I go for refuge...)

PAÑCASĪLA

THE FIVE PRECEPTS

Pānātipātā veramanī sikkhapadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I take the precept to refrain from killing or harming any living being.

(I will act for the welfare and happiness of all beings.)*

Adinnādāna veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I take the precept to refrain from stealing or cheating.

(I will be honest, generous and take delight in sharing.)

Kāmesu micchācārā veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I take the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.

(I will be honest in relationships, nurturing true love and compassion.)

Musāvādā veramanī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.

I take the precept to refrain from lying.

(I will speak words that are true, gentle, noble and beneficial)

*Surā-meraya-majja-pamādatthānā veramanī
sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

I take the precept to refrain from taking alcohol and drugs which cause heedlessness.

(I will strive to keep my mind pure, alert, mindful and unconfused.)

Imāni pañca sikkhāpadāni samādiyāmi.

I undertake to keep these five precepts.

* The statements in brackets are added to bring out the positive aspect of the precept.

TIRATANA VADANĀ

SALUTATION TO THE TRIPLE GEM

Buddha-vandanā

*Iti'pi so bhagavā arahaṃ sammāsambuddho
vijjā-carāṇa-sampanno sugato lokavidū
anuttaro purisadamma-sārathī satthā deva-
manussānaṃ buddho bhagavā.*

Salutation to the Buddha

Such, indeed, is the Exalted One: worthy, perfectly enlightened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, well-gone, knower of worlds, incomparable tamer of those who can be tamed, teacher of gods and men, enlightened and exalted.

Dhamma-vandanā

*Svākkhāto bhagavatā dhammo sandiṭṭhiko
akāliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccattaṃ
veditabbo viññūhi.*

Salutation to the Dhamma

Well-expounded is the Dhamma by the Exalted One, directly visible, immediately effective, inviting one to come and see, leading onwards, to be personally realized by the wise.

Sangha-vandanā

Supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅgho.
Ujupaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅgho.
Nāyapaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅgho.
Sāmīcipaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅgho.
Yadidaṃ cattāri purisayugāni aṭṭha
 purisapuggalā esa bhagavato sāvakaśaṅgho.
Āhuneyyo pāhuneyyo dakkhineyyo
 añjalikaranīyo anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ
 lokassa.

Salutation to the Sangha

The Order of the Exalted One's disciples is
 practising well.
The Order of the Exalted One's disciples is
 practising rightly.
The Order of the Exalted One's disciples is
 practising correctly.
The Order of the Exalted One's disciples is
 practising properly.
That is, the four pairs of persons, the eight kinds
of individuals, this Order of the Exalted One's
disciples is worthy of offering and hospitality,
worthy of gifts and salutation, the supreme field
of merit for the world.



METTĀ SUTTA

THE DISCOURSE ON LOVING KINDNESS

*Karaṇīyam attha-kusalena,
yaṃ taṃ santam padaṃ abhisamecca;
Sakko ujū ca sūjū ca,
suvaco c'assa mudu anatimāni.*

What should be done by one skilled in good wishing
to attain the state of peace is this:
He should be capable, upright, extremely honest, meek,
gentle and humble.

*Santussako ca subharo ca,
appakicco ca sallahukavutti;
Santindriyo ca nipako ca,
appagabbho kulesu ananugiddho.*

Contented, easily supported with few duties,
living lightly, serene in faculties, discreet, not rude,
not attached to families.

*Na ca khuddaṃ samācare kiñci,
yena viññū pare upavadeyyuṃ;
Sukhino vā khemino hontu,
sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā.*

He should not commit even the slightest thing for
which the wise might blame him.
And he should contemplate: May all beings be happy
and safe! May all beings be joyful!

*Ye keci paṇā-bhūtatthi,
tasā vā thāvāra vā anavasesā;
Dighā va ye mahantā vā,
majjhimā rassakānuka-thūlā.
Diṭṭhā vā yeva adiṭṭhā,
ye ca dūre vasanti avidūre;
bhūtā va sambhavesī vā,
sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā.*

Whatever living beings there be: weak or strong,
tall, stout or medium; short, small or large,
without exception, seen or unseen, those dwelling
far or near, those who are born or those who are
to be born, may all beings be happy!

*Na paro paraṃ nikubbetha,
nātimaññetha katthacinaṃ kañci;
byārosanā paṭighasaññā,
nāññamaññassa dukkhamiccheyya.*

Let no one deceive another nor despise
any person anywhere.
Let him not, out of anger or ill will, wish harm
to another.

*Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ,
āyusā ekaputtāṃ anurakkhe;
Evampi sabba-bhūtesu,
mānasaṃ bhāvaye aparimānaṃ.*

Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let him cultivate a boundless heart of love towards all beings.

*Mettañca sabbalokasmiṃ,
mānasam bhāvaye aparimāṇam;
Uddham adho ca tiriyañ ca,
asambādham averam asapattam.*

Let his thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world: above, below and all around, without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity.

*Tittham caram nisinno vā,
sayāno vā yāva tassa vigatamiddho;
Etaṃ satim adhiṭṭheyya,
Brahmametaṃ vihāram idhamāhu.*

Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, as long as he is awake, he should develop this mindfulness.

This is called divine abiding here.

*Diṭṭhiñca anupagamma,
sīlavā dassanena sampanno;
Kāmesu vineyya gedham,
na hi jātugabbhaseyyam punareti.*

Not falling into wrong views, being virtuous and endowed with insight, and discarding attachment to sense desires, he will surely not come back to any womb.

PAṬICCA SAMUPPĀDA

THE LAW OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

Anuloma

*Avijjā-paccayā saṅkhārā;
Saṅkhārā-paccayā viññāṇaṃ;
Viññāṇa-paccayā nāma-rūpaṃ;
Nāma-rūpa-paccayā salāyatanaṃ;
Salāyatana-paccayā phassa;
Phassa-paccayā vedanā;
Vedanā-paccayā taṇhā;
Taṇhā-paccayā upādānaṃ;
Upādāna-paccayā bhavo;
Bhava-paccayā jāti;
Jāti-paccayā jarā-maraṇaṃ soka-parideva-
dukkha-domanassu-pāyāsā sambhavanti.
Evametassa kevalassa dukkha-kkhandhassa
samudayo hoti.*

In Order of Arising

Through ignorance is conditioned Kamma formations.

Through Kamma formations is conditioned
(rebirth-linking) consciousness.

Through (rebirth-linking) consciousness is conditioned
mind and matter.

Through mind and matter is conditioned the
six sense bases.
Through the six-sense bases is conditioned contact.
Through contact is conditioned feeling.
Through feeling is conditioned craving.
Through craving is conditioned grasping.
Through grasping is conditioned becoming.
Through becoming is conditioned birth.
Through birth is conditioned aging and death together
with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.
Thus, does this entire bundle of suffering arise.

Paṭiloma

*Avijjāyatveva asesā-virāga-nirodhā
saṅkhāra-nirodho;
Saṅkhāra-nirodhā viññāṇa-nirodho;
Viññāṇa-nirodhā nāma-rūpa-nirodho;
Nāma-rūpa-nirodhā saḷāyatana-nirodho;
Saḷāyatana-nirodhā phassa-nirodho;
Phassa-nirodhā vedanā-nirodho;
Vedanā-nirodhā taṇhā-nirodho;
Taṇhā-nirodhā upādāna-nirodho;
Upādāna-nirodhā bhava-nirodho;
Bhava-nirodhā jāti-nirodho;
Jāti-nirodhā jarā-maraṇaṃ soka-parideva-
dukkha-domanassa-pāyāsā nirujjhanti.
Evametassa kevalassa dukkha-kkhandhassa
nirodho hoti.*

In Order of Cessation

With the complete cessation of this ignorance,

Kamma formations cease.

With the cessation of Kamma formations,

(rebirth-linking) consciousness ceases.

With the cessation of (rebirth-linking) consciousness,

mind and matter cease.

With the cessation of mind and matter,

the six sense bases cease.

With the cessation of the six sense bases,

contact ceases.

With the cessation of contact,

feeling ceases.

With the cessation of feeling,

craving ceases.

With the cessation of craving,

grasping ceases.

With the cessation of grasping,

becoming ceases.

With the cessation of becoming,

birth ceases.

With the cessation of birth, ageing and death together

with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair,

cease.

Thus, does this entire bundle of suffering cease.



UPASAMĀNUSSATI

RECOLLECTION OF PEACE

*Aniccā vata sankhārā.
Uppāda-vaya-dhammino.
Uppajjitvā nirujhanti.
Tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho.*

Impermanent are all conditioned things.
Of a nature to arise and pass away.
Having arisen, they pass away.
Their calming and cessation is true bliss.

PATTHANĀ

ASPIRATIONS

Idaṃ me puññaṃ āsavakkhavāyahaṃ hotu.

May these merits of mine* lead to the extinction of
mental defilements.

*Idaṃ me puññaṃ magga-phala-nibbānassa
paccayo hotu.*

May these merits of mine* be a condition for the
attainment of path and fruition knowledges and
Nibbana.

* When reciting together, we may say: May these merits of ours...

PATTIDĀNA

SHARING OF MERITS

Idaṃ me ñātīnaṃ hotu sukhitā hontu ñātayo.

May these merits accrue to our departed relatives.

May they be happy.

Imaṃ no puññabhāgaṃ sabba-sattānaṃ bhajema.

May all beings share in these merits.

Sabbe sattā sukhi hontu.

May all beings be happy.

Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!

Excellent! Excellent! Excellent!



APPENDIX (II)

VERSES FOR CONTEMPLATION

Short; alas, is the life of man, limited and fleeting, full of pain and torment. One should wisely understand this, do good deeds and lead a holy life, for no mortal ever escapes death.

Just as the dewdrop at the point of the grass blade at sunrise very soon vanishes and does not remain for long: just so is the dewdrop-like life of men very short and fleeting.

Just as at the pouring down of a mighty rain, the bubbles on the water very soon vanish and do not remain for long: just so is the bubble-like life of men very short and fleeting.

Just as a furrow drawn with a stick in the water very soon vanishes and does not remain for long: just so is the furrow-like life of men very short and fleeting.

Just as the cattle for slaughter, whatever foot they lift, ever stand on the brink of death: just so is the life of men, as with cattle for slaughter, very short and fleeting.

One should wisely understand this, do good deeds and lead a holy life; for no mortal ever escapes death.

— Buddha, *Anguttara Nikāya*

All beings some day have to die,
Their life one day will end in death,
And they will fare after their deeds,
And good or bad fruits they will reap.

The evildoer fares to hell,
The good person to a happy world.
Hence, noble deeds you should perform
As provisions for the next life.
For good deeds will give you
Strong support in the next world.

— Buddha, *Samyutta Nikāya*



Here he grieves, hereafter he grieves.
In both states, the evil-doer grieves.
He grieves, he is afflicted, perceiving
the impurity of his own deeds.

Here he rejoices, hereafter he rejoices.
In both states, the good doer rejoices.
He rejoices, he exceedingly rejoices,
perceiving the purity of his own deeds.

— Buddha, *Dhammapada* 15 & 16



As with a staff the herdsman
drives his cattle to pasture,
even so do old age and death
drive out the lives of beings.

— Buddha, *Dhammapada* 135



A man returning from afar after a long absence
is welcomed with joy by his relatives and friends.
Likewise, the good-doer when he goes from this world
to the next, will be received by his good deeds.

— Buddha, *Dhammapada* 219 & 220



Beings, monks, are owners of their kamma
heirs of their kamma, kamma is the womb from
which they spring; they are bound up with their kamma;
kamma is their true refuge.
Whatever deeds they do, good or evil,
of that they will be the heirs.

— Buddha, *Anguttara Nikāya*



THE DART

1. Life is unpredictable and uncertain in this world. It is difficult and brief and bound up with suffering.
2. A being, once born, is going to die and there is no way out of this. When old age arrives, or some other cause, then there is death. This is the way it is with beings.
3. When fruits become ripe, they may fall in the early morning. In just the same way a being, once born, may die at any moment.
4. Just as the clay pots made by the potter have breaking up as their end, so it is with the life of mortals.
5. Both young and old, foolish or wise, are going to be trapped by death. All beings move towards death.
6. They are overcome by death. They go to the other world. And then not even a father can save his son, or a family their relatives.
7. Look, while relatives are watching, tearful and wailing, men are carried off, one after another, like cattle being led to the slaughter.
8. So death and ageing are common to the world. Therefore the wise, seeing the nature of the world, do not grieve.
9. You cannot know a person's path — as to where he has come from, or where he is going. So, it makes no sense to grieve for him when he dies.
10. The man who grieves gains nothing. He is doing no more than a foolish man who is trying to hurt himself.
11. Peace of mind cannot come from weeping and wailing. On the contrary, it will lead to more suffering and pain.

12. The mourner will become pale and thin. He is doing violence to himself, and still he cannot bring the dead to life; his mourning is pointless.
13. The man who cannot leave behind his sorrow only travels further into pain. His mourning makes him a slave to sorrow.
14. Look at beings who are facing death, who are going in accordance with their actions, living creatures quivering indeed here, having come into the power of death.
15. What people expect to happen is always different from what actually happens. From this comes great disappointment; this is the way the world works.
16. A person may live for a hundred years, or even more, but in the end he is separated from his relatives, and he too leaves life in this world.
11. So, one should listen and learn from the wise man who has given up grief. Seeing that a person has passed away and lived out his life, one should understand, "This person has gone on. He cannot be brought back again by me."
18. Just as one might extinguish the flames of a burning house with water, so too the wise man, skilful, learned and firm, extinguishes sorrow when it has arisen. He lets go of the grief as the wind that blows away a tuft of cotton.
19. The person who is searching for happiness should pull out the dart that is stuck to his chest, the barb of grieving, of desiring, of despair.
20. The person, who has taken out the dart, who has no more clinging, who has obtained peace of mind, has gone beyond all grief. This person, free from grief, is still.

— Buddha, *Sutta Nipata* vv. 574–593

APPENDIX (III)

HE FARES THE WAY HE HAD TO TREAD

A STORY FROM THE JATAKA

Once, the Bodhisatta was reborn as a farmer with a wife and two children — a son and a daughter. When the son was grown up, the father brought a wife home for him. Thus, with a female servant they composed a household of six: the bodhisatta and his wife, the son and daughter, the daughter-in-law and the servant. They lived happily and affectionately together.

The bodhisatta often admonished the other five: “According as you have received, give alms; observe the holy days, keep the moral precepts, dwell on the thought of death, be mindful of your mortal state. For all of us must eventually die. Death is certain, life uncertain. All existing things are transient and subject to decay. Therefore, conduct yourselves well at all times.” They readily accepted his teaching and were mindful of their mortal state.

Then, one day the son was bitten by a snake. At the time, the bodhisatta was working in the field with his son. He saw his son fall, went to investigate, and found his son dead. He carried the youth, laid him at the foot of a tree, and covered the body with a cloak. He neither lamented nor wept. Instead, he said: “That which is subject to dissolution is dissolved, and that which is subject to death is dead. All conditioned phenomena are transient and liable to death.”

And he sent word through a passer-by to inform his wife and to summon his family to the field. Meanwhile, he calmly continued with his ploughing. His wife, on receiving the news, remained calm. She gathered the other family members and brought food, as usual, for the bodhisatta's noon meal. None of them cried or lamented. The bodhisatta, sitting in the shade where his son lay, ate his food. And when his meal was finished, they gathered firewood and made a funeral pile on which they burned the body. But not a single tear was shed by anyone. All were dwelling on the thought of death, contemplating that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent and subject to dissolution.

Sakka, the king of heaven, spied what was going on below. He was impressed by the family's composure and, disguised as an old man, he approached the family and asked, "What are you doing?"

"We are burning the body of a man, sir."

"It doesn't appear like you are burning a man," he said. "It looks more like you are roasting the flesh of some beast you have slain."

"It is not so, sir," they said. "It is the body of a man we are burning."

Then Sakka said, "This man you are burning must have been some enemy."

The bodhisatta said, "No, sir. It is our own true son, and no enemy."

"Then he could not have been dear as a son to you. You could not have loved him very much."

“On the contrary, he was very dear, sir. We loved him very much.”

“Then why do you not weep?”

The bodhisatta then replied in verse:

*“Man quits his mortal frame, when joy in life is past.
E’en as a snake is wont its worn-out skin to cast.
No friend’s lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”*

Then Sakka asked the bodhisatta’s wife, “How, lady, did the dead man stand to you?”

“I sheltered him ten months in my womb, and after he was born I suckled him at my breast. I taught him how to walk and stand, and he was my grown-up son, sir.”

“Granted, lady, that a father from the nature of a man may not weep, but a mother’s heart is tender. Why then do you not weep?”

And to explain why she did not weep, she replied in verse:

*“Uncalled he came to me, and unbidden he went.
E’en as he came, he went. What cause is here for woe?
No friend’s lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”*

Sakka then asked the sister, “Lady, what was the dead man to you?”

“He was my brother, sir.”

“Lady, sisters surely are loving towards their brothers. Why do you not weep?”

And she too replied in verse:

*“Though I should fast and weep, how would it profit me?
My kith and kith alas, would more unhappy be!
No friend’s lament can touch the ashes of the dead.
He fares the way he had to tread.”*

Sakka then asked the wife of the dead man, “Lady, what was he to you?”

“He was my husband, sir.”

“Women surely, when a husband dies, as widows are helpless. Why do you not weep?”

She replied in verse:

*“As children cry in vain to grasp the moon above,
So mortals idly mourn the loss of those they love.
No friend’s lament can touch the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”*

Sakka then asked the servant, “Lady, what was he to you?”
“He was my master, sir.”

“No doubt, he must have treated you cruelly. And now thinking that he is happily dead, you do not weep.”

“Speak not so, sir. This is not the case here. My young master was full of patience, compassion and love for me. He was like a foster child to me.”

“Then why do you not weep?”

And she replied in verse:

*“As a broken pot of earth, ah! who can piece again?
So too, to mourn the dead is nought but labour in vain.
No friend’s lament can touch the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”*

Sakka, greatly impressed by the answers he received, said: "All of you have carefully dwelt on the thought of death. I am Sakka, the king of heaven. Henceforth, you are not to labour any more. I will bless you with treasures in countless abundance. You are to continue to give alms, to keep the moral laws, to observe the holy days and be heedful in your conduct." And thus, filling their house with countless treasures, he departed from them.

NOTE:

The Jatakas are stories of the Buddha's previous lives. Before he became a Buddha, he was called a bodhisatta, a being aspiring for enlightenment. The Jatakas are primarily considered folk stories which are told to bring home moral truths.

In this particular story, the moral lesson is to understand the nature of impermanence and the law of kamma. It does not mean that we should deny or suppress our grief, for that too would be unhealthy. So, instead we can be mindful of our grief, we can acknowledge our pain, feel our sorrow, but we need not be overcome by it. We can bear up. We can reflect wisely and reconcile with our loss. We can let go.

We can reflect that we each come according to our kamma and we have similarly to go according to our kamma. Realizing this, we understand that ultimately we do not belong to each other. We meet temporarily and after that we part and go our separate way. Sometimes we may meet again in a future life but we cannot remember our past association.

On gaining enlightenment the Buddha realized that the way to end suffering is to end all forms of craving, which leads to rebirth. The end of craving is the end of rebirth, is the end of suffering.