

Grief and Loss



Religions and cultural considerations

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Buddhism - death/bereavement

Buddhist Beliefs:

- In re-becoming.
- Everything is impermanent.
- There is no permanent 'soul', people are made up of separate elements:
 - physical form
 - sensations
 - perceptions which disintegrate at death
- Believe in Karma (deeds/actions). It is only the result of previous actions that ensures a new set of elements is reconstituted to create a new person.
- Believe in Nirvana - not like heaven. Permanent liberation.

The image Buddha used to describe Nirvana was that of a flame. The flame lasts only as long as there is fuel to feed it - when it goes out it does not really 'go' anywhere.
- Believe that desire/craving is the 'fuel' - when desire ceases re-becoming ceases.
- Believe that desire/craving causes all suffering - and that there is a way of eliminating it - following eightfold path.

Types of Buddhism:

- Theravada - strict adherence to Buddha's teaching
- Mahayana
- Zen - branch of Mahayana (meditation)

Practices:

- The coffin is taken in a decorated carriage to the hall where the funeral takes place.
- It is surrounded by flowers and gifts which are given to the monks after the ceremony.
- Prayers will be said.
- There will be music and food.
- Death and re-becoming takes one nearer to Nirvana so usually there is no display of grief or tears.
- Emphasis is not on death but on new life.
- The attitude is of calmness and acceptance of death.
- The body is cremated.
- A photograph is placed near the coffin to remind those present of the transient nature of life.

Chinese - death/bereavement

Chinese Beliefs: Taoist

- The way (TAO) the universe works is governed by the twin forces of Yin and Yang.
- That life is a mixture - a balance of good and evil.
- That the soul is in 2 parts:
 - HUN SOUL = higher spiritual soul with Yang qualities
 - P'O SOUL = earthly soul with Yin qualities.
- At death the soul takes on a spirit form and faces a long journey into the underworld. It also enters a tablet (*details on it).
- The P'O soul stays at the grave where it must be pacified with food to make sure it doesn't emerge as a wicked ghost.
- That heaven is a place where ancestors live and from which they control earthly welfare. Those on earth should make sacrifices for them.
- That the dead become ghosts after 3 years, so KUEI (ghosts) must be honoured.
- That after death the soul crosses a bridge to the next life and passes through ten courts. Here, judges decide whether a person has led a good or bad life.
- Believe that heaven can be achieved by passing through courts or the soul will be punished before going further. Each judge and court is associated with certain faults and crimes.

Practices:

- See death - not as an end - more as a move into a new but not unconnected sphere where concerns of the material and spiritual well-being remain paramount and affect those left behind.
- Rites of mourning are a source of comfort to the bereaved.
- The purpose of the funeral rite is to aid the HUN's soul's spirit into the tablet and in its underworld journey.
- The body is washed and clothed - a plain or decorated coffin may be used - the colour of mourning is white - drums, cymbals, fireworks, noise, music (to scare off the evil spirits) accompany the procession to the graveyard - the unrestrained display of grief and noise releases much anguish and fear.
- Red banners (for good luck) and a piece of wood with written *details of the person's life on it lead the procession - this tablet will remain in the home for 21 days before joining others in the family shrine and then to the ancestral hall.
- When the coffin is buried, paper models of cars, houses and money are burnt to assist the dead person through the afterlife and to help pay their way through the courts of judgement - the most important models are given by a son of the dead person - offerings from the living family are very important throughout this time too.
- After 10 years the coffin is dug up, bones cleaned and placed in a sealed pot. Through the art of FENG SHUI (divination) the priest finds the right place to bury the pot - this is very important, otherwise the person may be unhappy and return to punish the family.
- Each year a festival - CHING MING is celebrated to remember all dead people - this is an official and communal sanctioning of the remembrance of the dead.

Religions and cultural considerations

Christianity - death/bereavement

Christian Beliefs:

- In God.
- In Jesus as the Son of God.
- That personal identity is retained after death.
- That human beings are in continuing fellowship with God - throughout life and after death.
- In judgement.
- (some) in heaven/hell.
- In eternal life : a quality of being.
- In a state called purgatory (Roman Catholics) - a place in which a soul of a person is purified ready to enter heaven.
- Some believe that death is a long sleep - until all souls are resurrected.
- That there is only one life to be lived.
- That a dead body is not polluting/evil/corrupt.

Practices:

The practices associated with death re-affirm essential Christian beliefs and are a means of re-affirming faith in God - which will help to cope with the loss and sorrow.

The body is placed in a coffin and taken to a church.

Burial was inherited from the Jews - but cremation is common today.

Readings/prayers/music.

Roman Catholic – mass.

In Protestant/Anglican rites there is great emphasis on Hope of Resurrection .

Diversity in practice e.g. Irish ‘wake’.

Memorials are affected more by social pressures rather than beliefs.

Wreaths: traditionally these are round to symbolise continuity and eternity.

Colour of mourning = black (until 8th Century - white).

It is acceptable to display grief with tears - this has been encouraged by the ‘church’ as a means of coping with loss.

Groups within Christianity:

Over 16,000 denominations worldwide

Roman Catholic

Greek Orthodox

Anglican

Humanism - death/bereavement

Humanist Beliefs:

- That death is a natural end to life.
- That death should be as painless as possible, hence support for voluntary euthanasia.
- That there is no ‘future life’ or ‘heaven’, punishment/reward.
- That there is no supernatural dimension.

Practices:

Legally there need be no ceremony at all - the undertaker could dispose of the body.

However, humanists are extremely sensitive towards the needs of the living. So there may be non-religious funeral ceremonies or memorial meetings.

The form of the ceremony is determined by the relatives and the wishes of the deceased.

Usually there is a simple ceremony at the crematorium.

A key and distinctive element of the ceremony will be the remembrance and commemoration of the dead person’s achievements in life.

Religions and cultural considerations

Hinduism - death/bereavement

Hindu Beliefs:

- That each person has a soul which is permanent and unchanging.
- That at death the soul sheds its body and 'puts on' another body (not necessarily human) in an endless cycle of re-births. Finally it will reach God.
- In the transmigration of souls (atman).
- That during life one passes through 16 stages. The stages are called SAMSKARAS.
- In one God – Brahman.
- That the physical body is made up of Fire, Air, Earth, Water.
- Cremation returns the body to fire/air.
- Burial returns the body to earth.
- That death brings impurity into the home.
- In the law of KARMA (deeds) moral / behavioural law.

NB There is tremendous diversity/ range within Hinduism - particularly as it is affected by regional factors/practices.

Practices:

- The body is wrapped in a cloth and placed in a coffin. It is usually cremated within 24 hours of death.
- The coffin is carried to the place of cremation by 6 male relatives. Close female relatives are discouraged from attending the cremation - distress (cultural rather than religious).
- The coffin is covered with flowers. Ghee is poured over it to help it burn. The eldest son should set the coffin alight. In Britain - press button at cremation.
- Readings about reincarnation are selected from the Holy Books.
- 3 days after cremation the ashes are collected and scattered on a river - River Ganges if at all possible.
- Friends and relatives bring gifts to the family, keep them company, share grief and support them.
- On 11th/13th day - all will gather to offer PINDA - rice balls and milk to the dead person - this is to show they are grateful for the acts of kindness which they received during his/her lifetime.
- The eldest son or other male relative will have their head shaved as a sign of bereavement and cleansing.
- After the 13th day, public mourning ends in a large feast, after which only private, personal grief remains.
- Memory is preserved in daily worship (Puja).
- Some Hindus hold feasts and make donations to charities at 3,6,9 month intervals.
- Colour of mourning = white.

Islam - death/bereavement

Muslim Beliefs:

- There is one God – Allah.
- That Muhammad is the prophet of God.
- That they must submit to the will of Allah.
- That there is only one life to be lived.
- In physical resurrection of the body.
- In judgement - Paradise everlasting - no intermediate stage - Hell is strict and impartial justice.
- That there will be a day of judgement - cosmic upheaval, each soul will be judged according to deeds while on earth.
- That when a person dies their soul is looked after by the angel of death in a place called Barzakh (for one day) until God finally judges the world.
- That death is temporary separation.
- That extravagant expressions of grief are rebellion against the 'will of Allah'.

Groups within Islam:

- Sunni
- Shia
- Ahmadiyya
- Sufi
- Ishmaeli

Practices:

- Mourning is demonstrated by readings from the Qur'an - in this way the bereaved are supported and comforted by their faith.
- Prior to death, friends and relatives will gather and read from the Qur'an. The dying person always tries to say the Shahadah.
- Burial takes place within 24 hours.
- The body is washed, perfumed and wrapped in three pieces of white cotton (shroud) - men by men and women by women.
- Coffins will not be used - unless required by law.
- The body will be buried with the face towards MAKKAH. The grave will not be marked by a monument or tombstone.
- The family (traditionally) stays indoors for 3 days after the funeral - they will not cook. Friends and relatives will bring food to them.
- The grave may be visited every Friday for 40 days.
- The mourning period will last up to 3 months - during this time comfort, support, sharing in loss by friends and relatives. During this time there will be no celebrations or weddings.
- During EID celebrations, visits will be made to cemetery to say prayers at family graves - this is a reminder that even in midst of happy celebrations - life is temporary and it is important to live correctly to ensure eternal life with Allah.

Religions and cultural considerations

Judaism - death/bereavement

Jewish Beliefs:

- Belief in one God.
- That there is only one life to be lived.
- That after death the soul goes to the 'world to come' (OLAM HA'BA).
- In judgement - punishment, heaven, hell.
- That they should focus on what is involved in being faithful to God in this life and making the world fit for this rule.
- Orthodox believe in resurrection of the body (cremation forbidden).
- Orthodox believe in the coming of a Messiah - at which time all souls will return to their bodies.
- Reform Jews use the expression 'life eternal' for resurrection of the body (cremation permitted)

Groups within Judaism:

Orthodox - Hassidic (Ultra orthodox forms in Israel)

- Sephardic (European)
- Ashkenazi (Russian)

Reform

Liberal

Practices:

The key in relation to practice is to concentrate on support for the close relatives whilst ensuring that the memory of the individual is retained.

The last words a Jew will say before death is the SHERMA. Within 24 hours the body will be buried. The body will be washed, dressed and placed in a plain coffin.

There will be no flowers - to ensure that there is no distinction between rich and poor. Mourners will cut a slit in their outer clothes as a mark of grief (link with 'garments rent' also venting of anger/emotion).

The coffin is taken to the synagogue then to the cemetery. The cemetery - Bethayyim - Means 'house of life'. Everyone will participate in the internment by filling the grave with earth. The closest male relative will say the prayer - Kaddish - to help the dead person's soul to Olam Halba.

For one whole week the family will 'sit in mourning' - friends will provide food for them, they are encouraged to express their grief and talk about their loved one. For a month they will not participate in any entertainment. There is a gradual reduction in the intensity of the mourning in order to aid readjustment.

For the following 11 months Kaddish is said every day. Mourning is for 11 months - only a very wicked person needs longer.

Each year on the anniversary of the death the family say Kaddish and burn a candle for 24 hours.

The grave should be visited at least once a year - especially just before the Jewish New Year to ensure that cherished memories do not fade and to comfort the bereaved.

Islam - death/bereavement

Sikh Beliefs:

- In one God.
- In reincarnation.
- In heaven and hell - a soul may rest for a while before returning to earth. The soul will be corrected and/or rewarded. Heaven/Hell are temporary dwelling places.
- That there will be union with God - after human beings have progressed upwards through many existences from the lower forms of life. This union is described as 'merging with God'.
- That death is to be welcomed as removing the last obstacle to the complete union of God and the believer (hence do not encourage mourning).

Practices:

Before death - friends and relatives say the **Sukhmani** - psalm/song of peace from the Holy Book. (**Guru Granth Sahib**).

The body is washed and dressed by Friends and relatives will make gifts of money and oil.

The coffin is taken to the **Gurdwara**. The Gurdwara is the focus for all ceremonies rather than the home.

In the Punjab, the body would be cremated.

Only male relatives attend the service and then they will return to the Gurdwara for readings/prayers/hymns. The service ends with the distribution of **KARA PARSHAD** and a feast. This is to symbolise the continuity of social life as opposed to the isolation from human contacts and normal activities - also the rejection of fasting and other ritual manifestations of grief.

The ashes of the dead body are scattered on a Holy River.

Money is donated to charities.

For 10 days the family will read from the Guru Granth Sahib.

Relatives and close friends will keep the family company, comfort them, share grief and support them.

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