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The Buddhist Concept of Death

A Study in Comparative Religion

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THE manifest turmoil and unrest of these latter days—atheistic Communism, idolatrous materialism, Iron Curtain barbarism, A-bomb fears, and now the “H”—are but a coarser outburst, a more inflamed symptom, of the fundamental problem of all centuries—“How can man in sin overcome his separation from God?” “How can man conquer death which without Christ makes this separation from God forever painful and forever permanent?” All mankind—also those who call themselves Buddhists—face this inescapable problem—the problem of death. Like all mankind, so also the Buddhists, though in a more comprehensive and attractive manner than some, have adorned themselves with fig leaves of human reason and good works, and behind the trees and bushes of borrowed, mutilated, as well as prefabricated theological and non-theological concepts, have tried to hide themselves from that penetrating voice of the Lord God, who is still walking in the spoiled Eden of this world, and is still calling from the pages of Genesis 3 with the words: “Adam, where art thou?” bringing to mind those terrible and unforgettable words: “Thou shalt surely die!”

If we are to find the right approach to prepare the Buddhist to meet God as his Father in Christ Jesus, we must know how the Buddhist plans to meet God. In other words, What is the Buddhist concept of death? We consult stateside encyclopedias, compare SCAP reports and statistics, interview Japanese authorities, consult the people themselves, and find the Buddhist concept of death a difficult one to define.¹

* The author was commissioned in 1949 for service in Japan after spending one year in the Mission Department of the Postgraduate School of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This article is based on the paper which he read at the organizational conference of the Japan Conference of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, in Tokyo, March 1—3, 1950.

¹ Eventually, by personal experience, or more immediately by careful research, the missionary to Japan will learn that there are not only six major groupings of Japanese Buddhist sects, but also that within these six groupings (Nara, Tendai, Shingon, Amida, Zen, and Nichiren) there are at least ninety-three subsects, plus eight unclassified sects. The total number of adherents is approximately

The Western mind, reared in the atmosphere of Christian or Jewish theology, will be puzzled if it approaches Buddhism with the expectation of finding in it something familiar. Pure Buddhism has practically no theology, it is basically a philosophy and must be so studied. Even as a philosophy there is no uniformity or common pattern. Japanese Buddhism is a conglomerate of so many conflicting systems that it is as confusing as contemporary Christianity with its Coptic, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Churches. There are, however, some elements common to the teachings of most sects; such as acceptance of S'akyamuni Gautama as the founder of Buddhism, acknowledgment of his teachings as the essence of truth, conception of the attainment of Buddhahood as salvation, belief in the "three precious things" — Buddha, the law, and the Church — which S'akyamuni handed down to his followers, and belief in the three basic elements — morality, meditation, and intuition — as the proper approach to truth. . . . A Buddhist generally seeks salvation, depending on his sectarian affiliations, by following "the way" revealed by S'akyamuni, by obtaining the favor of the mythical Buddha Amida, or by apprehending "universal truth" and realizing the fundamental identity between himself and the cosmic Buddha Dainichi. Beyond these basic doctrines lies a maze of unrelated sectarian interpretations, speculations, and mystic rituals.²

Clarity and precision in presenting an over-all picture of Japanese Buddhism are so lacking that it is much too easy to generalize from a few particulars. This paper, therefore, will do no more than present the Buddhist concept of death as held by several individuals and as described by certain writers.

One dreary afternoon the writer went to the temple grounds to be guest of the Buddhist high priest of Sapporo. There in the parlor of his mansion, where everything is just the opposite of Buddhist self-negation, High Priest Ando, his scholarly wife, and their special research consultant held forth for four hours on the Buddhist concept of death. As high priest, Ando settled back into his stately chair;

43,000,000. Buddhism dates back to A. D. 552, when it was introduced from Korea. In Korea it dates back to 372 A. D., when it was brought from China. In China it dates back to 68 A. D., when it was brought from the Indo-Parthian king Gondophorus. From there we trace Buddhism back through the central Asia of Indo-Bactrian, Indo-Parthian, and Indo-Scythian days, all the way back to about 272 B. C. when under King Acoka of the Mauryan dynasty the faith of Gautama became the religion of all India.

² SCAP, *Religions in Japan*, p. 37.

he enveloped himself in a halo of smoke created by his incessant puffing of "Peace" cigarettes. Soon he began to utter beautiful words framed in dental gold. In part he said:

You should not come here to ask questions about death; when death is coming; how death is going to affect me; what death is like, etc. Instead of asking these questions we should rather overcome death and all suffering by conquering them with the mind. In Buddhism death is conceived as a form of suffering. As long as death does not give us any suffering, it does not concern us. *Therefore it may be concluded that death consists in suffering.* Likewise illness, old age, and birth consist in suffering. If illness would not be suffering, illness would not be what it is. Old age is dreadful just because one suffers from it. Birth, through which one enters into this sorrowful life, is something to be sorry about, because one must suffer it. Thus what is called in Buddhism "Four Sorrows," namely, death, illness, old age, and birth, have their reality in the fact that the human being suffers from them.

However, suffering itself has reality only in human thought. Let us suppose that there are visual sense and flowers and that there is no human mind to intervene. Then we cannot think that the flower is beautiful. The flower appears beautiful to us because we *think* it is beautiful. Beauty becomes real when human thought intervenes to make it so.

Death is dreadful to us because we make it so in our thinking. The suffering of death consists in our thought. Therefore to suppress the suffering of death, we must change our thought on death. Clear thought recognizes the fact that life must end with death some day or other. To the clear mind, death is not something which comes as a surprise. If you expect the coming of death as a matter of course, you should not be surprised or sad when it comes. When you were born, the ultimate destination of your life was death. The suffering of death is due to the fact that we do not want death to come — which, of course, is impossible. Our suffering of death comes from the fact that we want the impossible thing to be possible. We desire this impossibility because we are lacking in an uncompromising clearness of thought to see that death is inescapable. Death must come! This is the truth! By admitting uncompromisingly that this truth is inescapable one will become immune to the suffering of death.

At this point Ando-san heaved a sigh of relief, as though he were somehow again successful in convincing himself of his delusion. During the social part of the interview with the Buddhist high priest Mrs. Ando remarked:

If I could be sure like you that the Absolute Being has consciousness and that such a Being knows me, then I could not feel secure in my present belief.

Then, in a more relaxed tone, she continued on the subject of death by reading an essay which she specially prepared for this interview:

In Buddhism there is what is called the Great Life (or the Absolute). Human life originated from this Absolute Being. But it must be remembered that this Absolute Being does not have color, temperature, shape. It is not subject to space and time; *and it does not have consciousness!*

The human life which originated from this Great Life completes its course after going through twelve stages. The first stage is called obscurity. In this stage human life is not contaminated by sins as yet. The second stage is called behavior. In the third stage the human life acquires consciousness. In the fourth stage human life begins to form the body consisting of cells. In the fifth stage the cells which originated in the fourth stage form various human organs, such as ears, eyes, etc. In the sixth stage human life has senses. In the seventh it has perceptions. In the eighth love originates in human life. This love (*eros*) is responsible for sufferings and sins, because we suffer when we are deprived of the object of our love, and we commit sins when we harm others because of our selfish love.

Our ultimate goal is to return to the Great Life. Buddhism calls this return *salvation*. There are two major divisions in Buddhism. However, they are different only because of their different views as to the way of salvation. One teaches that salvation is dependent upon our own works, and the other teaches that even though there are some people who can gain salvation by their works, the majority of people must depend upon the mercy of Amida for their salvation. This freedom from suffering and death can best be experienced in the "Nirvana" of perfect meditation in this life and in the "Karma" of new existence in the future life.

Thus ended the interview with the teachers of dead concepts on a subject that is alive and real—death! Imagine the thoughts that went through the mind of the writer and his interpreter as they walked home that night. It was late, and the wind was moaning through the treetops. Four dark figures were plodding through the graying January snow, carrying a corpse, stiff in death, which was to be treated with special last rites in a small side room of the temple. What does the departed soul of that corpse think about death? What do those four Japanese undertakers think about death? What do the people of Japan

actually think about death? Excerpts from a letter by Mrs. Ando written shortly after the interview may explain in a measure why Japanese who claim to be Buddhist do not know the concept of death. We quote in part:

Today I beg leave to make a few corrections in the explanations I made on Buddhism. The explanation was prepared in great haste on the very morning of the day of your visit, and it was based on my hazy memories.

I explained the other day that the twelve stages correspond to the stages from the conception to birth of human being. But it was erroneous. They correspond to the stages from conception to the death.

I also failed to explain about one of the twelve stages, *YU*. *YU* is the sentient world, the world of delusion, namely, this earthly world.

I explained that twelve stages corresponded to the stages of origination of original human being. But this is only my own opinion. So please do not tell to other people too much about it so that I may not be scolded by the specialists.

Also about love: Surely the love (*eros*) drives us to suffering, sins, old age, and death. But, once born on this earth, one must die even though the love (*eros*) is eradicated from one's heart. All that has beginning has end.

Buddhism is fine as a belief, but I am more interested in its doctrinal phases. Its theories may be termed the forerunner of science. Theories of modern science approve of them. Buddhist theories contain very detailed explanations on the things which the present-day science does not know how to explain despite its strenuous research. I believe, however, that it will not be in a very remote future that science will become able to approve of Buddhist theories on those things. . . .

And so the scholars continue to speculate and meditate. The people of Japan continue to die. Sorrowing loved ones continue to discover that the funeral fees of a Buddhist priest are not a delusion of the mind, but his chief source of income!

An eminent authority on things Japanese is John F. Embree. Not only did he prepare the war background studies on Japan for the Smithsonian Institute, but among other books he has written a detailed sociological study on village life in Japan for the Sociology Department of Chicago University. This particular book is called *Suye Mura*, after the name of the village he studied, on Kyushu. Here is a summary of the concepts of death held by the Japanese of that village:

When the coffin is ready, the body is undressed by close relatives behind an inverted screen. It is washed very thoroughly and dressed in a white pilgrim's outfit which has been prepared by a woman relative during the morning. A Buddhist rosary is put on its hand and a couple of coins in a bag hanging in front (for the ferryman in the next world). The deceased's fan is also enclosed, a fan being an indispensable part of a fully dressed individual. Often something the deceased liked very much is included. If the person died on "tombiki" (an unlucky day for funerals), a straw doll is made and put into the coffin with the corpse; otherwise it would call some living person to the grave soon after. Often the dressers talk to the corpse, explaining what they are doing. Bunches of burning incense are held by all participants because the corpse kept in the house has a distinct odor. This is often remarked on bluntly during its washing and dressing.

The funeral is the Buddhist priest's chief source of income especially because of the series of memorial services which are observed in connection with each funeral.

When a man dies, his soul does not immediately leave the house, but it hovers around until the funeral. After burial it starts its journey to heaven or hell, depending on its virtues in this life and on the prayers of its living relatives and on its particular Buddhist sect affiliation. The soul of an orthodox Shinto believer does not go to the paradise of Amida, but it hovers indefinitely about the village shrine.

Nirvana (the belief in "nehan," or loss of self and desires) is not known everywhere nor well understood where it is known among the people—likewise the belief in "Karma," or reincarnation. However, there are a few popular beliefs referred to as superstitions. For example, if one is unduly afraid of snakes, he was once a frog.

Most of the ideas of heaven and hell come from the priests' talks and are not very much thought about except by the older folks. Some of the funeral preparations are performed to facilitate the dead person's progress to heaven. . . . Most of these things are done as a matter of routine custom, and few people can explain the meaning of these customs. Folded white papers are worn by the female mourners in their hair and behind their ears, and they are thrown into the grave at the time of burial. Rice is also taken to be placed in the grave for food in the hereafter. The dish is covered with a paper in which is a hole through which the evil spirits may escape. In some places broken dishes are used to make the food look less attractive for any evil spirit who may rob it from the corpse.

Each "buraku" has certain burial customs peculiar to itself. The differences in customs are usually explained as being customs of different Buddhist sects, and there is no feeling that one method of burial is better or worse than another.³

That is what John F. Embree learned about death after living among the people of Suye Mura for a period of 16 months. The writer has not been in Japan that long, nor has his purpose been to make a scientific sociological study, but even so it is surprising what one learns incidentally through personal contacts. The following statements were made at various times this past year by some of the Japanese of our Bible classes. For good reasons they remain anonymous.

Mr. A said: "Two things I remember most at the funeral of my uncle. One was the Indian mumbling of the priests which nobody understands, and the other was the furtive glances of the priests toward the table where the incense offering (poetic for funeral expense money) was being received from the invited mourners. My family does not welcome the visit of Buddhist priests on the anniversary of our uncle's death, for when we give him the expected donation in an envelope, he has a clever way of feeling the contents thereof as he slips it into the inner folds of his robe, and his facial expression soon reveals his approval or disapproval of amount given. The Buddhist priest is never seen in the home except for funerals or anniversaries of deaths or when collecting temple fees. A Buddhist priest furnishes glitter, ritual, and a few pious thoughts on infinite mercy and happiness hereafter. The people furnish the sympathy to the bewildered bereaved."

Mr. B in private interview said one afternoon: "I pray to the spirit of my deceased father every day. I owe him much as debt for ingratitude I have shown him in this life. How can I be sure he hears me?"

Mr. C, upon invitation to be baptized, said: "I cannot become Christian, for that would mean a complete break with all of the past. I want very much to become Christian, but the sleeping souls of all my ancestors in peaceful Buddhist temples prevent me."

Mr. D, a hungry dormitory student, relishing a good American meal, said: "When there is a death in our family, we cannot eat meat for at least four weeks. We have no explanation for the existence of this custom in our family."

Mr. E, a bewildered university student, said that three years ago he lost his father, who was a doctor. This student is still com-

³ Embree, John F., *Suye Mura*, *passim*.

pelled to observe Buddhist rituals with his family members, but he expressed a view which is typical of Japanese young people: "We who are 'scientifically' educated have no view on death."

And so it is possible to continue by giving many more examples of Japanese ideas, closely or not so closely related to the Buddhist concept of death. The more one studies this subject, the more one is inclined to draw the following deduction: *In Japan the Buddhist concept of death consists of the original Buddhist theories, opinions of the various sect scholars, plus the wide range of vague beliefs and superstitions of the Japanese who to a greater or lesser degree have been influenced by Buddhism.* The Christian missionary in Japan who wishes to approach the Buddhist concept of death intelligently finds a concept that is as wide as it is broad. Obviously the Christian approach must not only be one of historical research and investigation, but above all an effectual evangelical presentation of the true concept of death, i. e., the Christian concept of death, centered in Christ's resurrection!