

## Buddhist Funeral

### Religious Participant Observation:

Buddhist Funeral

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On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015, my aunt's mother passed away after she fell and hit her head. She was not related to me, and she was not really a part of my family (my aunt married my

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mother's brother, so she was my cousins' grandmother unrelated to me), so I did not know her all that well. My aunt's family is Japanese, and my family, on my mother's side (which is where this overlay occurs), is Italian. However, when my uncle told us (us being my mother, aunt [my mother's sister], my grandmother, my brother, and myself) she passed away and invited us to the funeral, we were more than happy to go and support our family members who were affected (my aunt, uncle, and cousins). The funeral took place at Fukui Mortuary "Chapel in the Garden", 707 E. Temple St., Los Angeles, CA, at twelve o'clock, noon. It was a relatively short service; the service, itself, took no longer than thirty minutes. It was conducted by Reverend William Briones of Hompa Hongwanji Buddhist Temple officiating.

The attendees of the funeral were dressed differently depending on their relation to the deceased: close family members primarily dressed in white, while other members typically wore dark colors, such as black. I found this particularly interesting, since typically people in many societies dress in black and dark colors when attending a funeral, or simply when mourning a death. The attendees were dressed very nicely; the men wore suits and ties, or at the very least a button-down shirt and tie, and the women wore dresses (even my cousin, whom I have never seen in a dress, except for when our grandfather died). As to be expected, the family members were very solemn, most crying softly before, during, and after the ceremony. We initially met outside in the cemetery before the ceremony occurred. The cemetery (which, a month later, where we would gather once again when the grandfather passed away) was extremely beautiful: the grass was green, there was a lake (maybe a pond; it was of moderate size) in the middle, which had streams that lead off in a couple different directions. There were bridges styled similar to those one may find in Japan; it was wooden, colored red, with ornate carvings around the bottom. I also saw a few Shinto gates (these gates are wooden and red, and look just like the symbol we talked about in class) around the property.

When the ceremony was about to begin, we all filed into the building where the ceremony would be conducted. The outside did not have anything particularly spectacular; it was painted white and looked as if it could be just any old building. The inside, however, was a stark contrast: it was highly decorated, with pictures of Buddha and other possible religious scenarios (I could not take pictures inside the building, at the request of the Temple, so I do not quite remember what they look like), and a statue of Buddha in the back, situated behind the

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altar, which held a picture of the deceased and the podium where the Reverend stood. There was a great deal of gold and red decorum around the entire room; those seem to be popular colors in Buddhist tradition. Flowers were also present everywhere and all around the room (primarily white and yellow in color), as well as candles, which were the source of light in the room.

The Reverend soon walked in to begin the ceremony. He was an older man, not elderly, but approximately fifty years old, with a shaved head and a gray-white moustache. He was wearing traditional robes, colored black and white with sashes across his torso and around his neck, colored red and gold. He started off the ceremony very calmly, talking about Buddhist beliefs concerning death and describing a little of the traditions of Buddhist religion, particularly explaining their belief of reincarnation and their concepts of death and rebirth. I suspect some of the explanation might have been due to the fact that there were some non-Buddhists (the Italian side of the family) in attendance, but it also might have just been procedure in case not everyone was aware of the traditions. He spoke English, which is what I expected, though I partially anticipated him speaking Japanese, since the family of the deceased is Japanese (and I believe that most of the family member do speak Japanese). He was very kind and compassionate, and even added some humor into his speech.

Reverend Briones would periodically read Buddhist sutras, which are essentially the Buddhist equivalent of Christian psalms, in between talking about the deceased and explaining Buddhist beliefs. The sutras were read in Sanskrit from a book of sutras (he never said the exact name of the book, and when I researched it, I found that there are many different sutra books, and I have no way of telling which one he used), after which he would paraphrase in English. While reading, he would also hit a small gong at what I would assume to be climactic points in the sutra, though I do not understand Sanskrit so I could not particularly tell. Near the end, he recited a beautiful poem about life and death, and unfortunately by the time I recorded my notes, I, and my family members, could not remember the name of the poem. Then, all of the attendees of the funeral got up, one by one, and went to the front of the room, where the altar and podium was, and lit incense and said a prayer for the deceased. This part was particularly awkward for me and my family, since we did not know the woman; I did not really know what to say, but it was very honorable to be a part of, and I apparently did not say anything heinous.

According to my uncle (who I had asked when I saw him for my grandmother's birthday,

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which my aunt did not attend), my aunt, herself, is not very religious, but her family does practice more consistently. However, my uncle said that the funeral was very bare-bones; the family decided to not go as extravagant as they could have, though traditionally Buddhists do not care much for extravagancy anyway. One difference I found between traditional funerals and the funeral I attended was that during traditional funerals, upon entering the room, the attendees must approach the altar and bow before it as a sign of respect, however, at the funeral I attended, this was not enforced. As I recall, a few of the family members closest to the deceased did go up and bow before they sat down, but more did not. Everyone did, however, bow at the end when burning the incense and saying a prayer (Buddhist Traditions).

One difference that I noticed, after doing some research, is that there were not offerings of fruit at the altar. According to a website I found describing Buddhist funerals, fruit is often offered at the altar along with candles, incense, and flowers. Another small exception was that there was no open casket showing before the ceremony, or even after the ceremony, which is also another common aspect of Buddhist funerals. According to the website, open casket viewing is something that always occurs during funerals, so I find it very strange that there was not one for this funeral. I asked my uncle, but he could not give me a clear answer; he simply said, “They decided not to have an open casket. I don’t know why, but they just didn’t want to do it”. The website also said that cremation is a common practice, but I do not believe she was cremated, since there was a casket and a burial service (Buddhist Funeral).

Going to this funeral was a very enlightening experience for me. I am no stranger to death: when I was in kindergarten my dog, Duke, had to be put down (he was thirteen and had been through a lot, including an eagle attack), and when I was in third grade my grandfather (mother’s father) passed away. Since my family is Catholic, at least by heritage, not particularly by practice (my parents are not very religious), I have experienced a Catholic funeral service and knew of some of the traditions regarding Catholic funerals. Experiencing a Buddhist funeral and learning firsthand about their ideals concerning death was very informative and interesting. Most people fear death, to an extent, though Buddhists seem more accepting of it, since the samsara cycle (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth) is a prominent aspect of Buddhism. Since they believe in the samsara cycle, death simply means either a transition to the next stage (reincarnation) or, if they have reached true enlightenment, the final step before entering nirvana (in which they

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would essentially cease to exist, since they would have broken out of the samsara cycle). For Catholics, there is really only two outcomes of death, both existing in the afterlife with no reincarnation, so death may seem more finalized.

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