

Question #2

I will talk about Buddhist and Catholic views of death. I will draw from the moodle reading on Buddhism and my own Catholic upbringing. Something that struck me as interesting was the similarity between the Buddhist and Catholic ideas of the state in which we enter death. In Buddhism, “The state of the mind of the dying person at the moment of death is thought to influence the rebirth process.” (130) The Buddhist idea of *karma* is well known, though often misinterpreted. I think that it resembles the Catholic idea of sin. In Catholicism, people go to confession in order to be absolved of their sins and cleanse their souls. One of the sacraments, the Anointing of the Sick, is often used to absolve those who are on the verge of death. According to the reading, Buddhists sometimes chant *sutras* near the dying in order to preserve serenity of mind.

These two practices are not so different. It is true that Buddhists believe they are protecting the person’s interest in their next life, while Catholics hope to ensure a person’s entry into Heaven – however, the two share the idea of purity. Whether it is to purify the soul of sin so that the person may pass freely into an eternal state of unity with God, or to maintain the purity of a person’s mind so that their next life is not negatively affected, both religions try to send their dying off in peace.

It is interesting that Buddhism is said to have far more extensive death education than do Catholicism. When I was a practicing Catholic as a child I remember being taught about a plethora of beliefs, among which death practices were not given any particular importance. We were taught a great deal about the aforementioned confession and penance, but this was not done in the context of death but of living a healthy life. I shouldn’t wonder if Buddhist practices are far more effective in attaining a purity of spirit or of mind than Catholic ones. Repenting is all

very well and good, but we must remember *why* we do so. For Buddhist's they are reminded that everything they do affects their future reincarnations, and that to someday find enlightenment they must constantly strive to better themselves. It is all too easy to forget why one is repenting, especially in modern day churches where the priest often hears your sins, tells you to say a few Hail Maries, and sends you one your way.

I think that remembering death is important for a healthy life. Whether we believe in an afterlife, reincarnation, or an eternity of nothingness, our time here will come to an end. All of us are guilty of wasting time, of spending our energies on things that hurt ourselves or others. The Stoics of Ancient Greece knew this well – they advocated death contemplation, so that one might never forget the limits of mortal existence. Perhaps we would not be so wasteful, so greedy, so cruel, if we better remembered that at any second we could be whisked away from this world. Any act could be our last.

Question #2: Works Cited

Truitner, Ken, and Nga Truitner. "Death and Dying in Buddhism." *Death and Dying in Ethnic Communities*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 125-36. Print.

Question #3

The death scene I found most interesting in *Departures* was the one a little over halfway through the film in which Daigo is preparing a girl who died in a bike accident. Her mother tells him that the makeup is not right and that he must redo it. Her husband begins to berate her, asking why she is worrying about this now, and saying that if she had raised their daughter better this would not have happened. From within the small group of onlookers a young man tells the father not to say such things, and that he never paid much attention to his daughter either. The father screams at the young man, who we realize is the boyfriend of the dead girl. It is your fault, says the father, you got her on that bike. He must be restrained by some of the family as he begins to physically attack the young man. Someone else then asks the boyfriend if he can ever make up for what he has done. Can he take a job like Daigo's and spend the rest of his life repenting? A cry of I'm sorry is wrenched from the young man's throat as the scene ends.

I believe this scene was intended to highlight the shame of Daigo's job, which is why one of the family members asked the boyfriend if he would take Daigo's job to make up for what he had done. This served as the motivation for Daigo to want to quit. However, for my personally the scene evoked many other things. It made me wonder why people feel this strong need to blame something or someone when they experience a loss. I have yet to lose a close loved one to death, but when my mother's brother died I watched her go through a period of extreme grief. She was always a religious woman, never intensely devout but never forgetting her spirituality. When her brother died in a bike accident she stopped going to church. She blamed God for what happened to him. I never asked, but now I wonder if she blamed the elderly couple who backed out of a parking space into him as he was riding past.

Why do people feel this need to blame? I think we seek explanations, we seek reason behind these events whose pain exceeds our understanding. There must be something that *caused* this to happen, we think, something more than pure chance. So people blame – maybe they blame the doctors, maybe they blame their own family (as in the scene from *Departures*), maybe they blame God. They take all of the grief they are feeling, all the anger, all the frustration, and put it outside of themselves, onto something or someone else. I believe this helps them deal with the loss.

I hope that when I do lose someone I love – and it could happen any day – that I will be strong enough to find another way. I don't believe in God, so I won't be blaming him. I don't want to blame doctors or others who tried to help, and I certainly don't want to blame any of my surviving loved ones for playing a part in the death. This is not meant as a condemnation of those who do these things. As someone who has not gone through this I would never pretend to be above those who seek healing through blame. I can only imagine their pain, and recognize that when I am in that position I will surely be willing to do anything to alleviate that pain. But I do hope that I will find another way. Blame will not lead to healing, only forgiveness can do that. When I do lose someone, I will remind myself of this. I will remember that there is no use in blaming others for the tragic event that has taken place. I will remember that feeling angry towards someone is not *really* putting anger outside myself but holding it in. I will remember that the only way to put this anger aside is to forgive and to accept.

Question #4

I personally believe that there is nothing waiting for us on the other side of the grave. When we die the electrochemical connections between the billions of neurons in our brains somatic nervous systems will cease to function, and everything we are will go with them into the dark. Our consciousness, our personality, our memories, will all be lost. They are stored only as patterns in these amazing cells, and once the cells stop, so do we.

Our reading does not spend much time talking about the afterlife, with the exception of the last several readings concerning ethnic and religious conceptions of death. Before this we dealt with the process of death up to the actual event (or end of the process, depending on your definition) and not beyond. This makes it difficult to use the materials from class to support a position on the existence or lack thereof of an afterlife. However, I think it will be interesting to examine how views of the afterlife might affect our definitions of death.

For example, the common Christian belief in a soul which is tethered to the body as a whole might motivate someone to believe in the somatic definition of death – that we die only when our respiratory and circulatory systems cease to function. Someone whose brain is irreversibly dead might, under this belief system, still be considered alive. Perhaps a religious person might say that their soul is still inside their body, despite the fact that the brain-dead individual will never again be a conscious person. If they still have a soul, then they are still alive, and must be treated with the respect due to a living person. This idea may make it difficult for doctors and hospital staff to prioritize space, as distraught families refuse to withdraw life support from relatives who will never again open conscious eyes. I do not mean to suggest that *only* those who are religious will have difficulties with this decision, but merely that such beliefs are one possible source of complications in such matters.