APPENDIX

Essay in Real Time and with Real Pictures

How Sinhala Buddhists Cope with Death:
Funeral Ceremony as Mother/Social Worker, Community Worker, Psychologist, Psychiatrist and Spiritual Guide

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Pictures

1. Sangha members present at the funeral.
2. The late Sauris Silva lies-in-state at Funeral Parlor, a crown worn by him at his dance performances placed above his head. The casket skirt shows birth (upata) (1898) and death (vipata) (1982). Two tusks stand guard, with a dhammacakka wheel at the back centre.
3. A drummer and a horn player announce the arrival of departure time.
4. People lining up for the processional to the cemetery.
5. Casket carried by son Sugunasiri and nephew Chandrasena and others. A white parasol over the casket symbolizes the royal-like respect. In front are the paavaada, clean white cloth covering the route of the procession, white being the colour of purity and cleanliness in Sinhala Buddhist culture.
6. Mourners joining the processional.
8. Son Sugunsiri offers the mataka vattha ‘memory cloth’, which has been passed along to be touched by those attending to show personal respect, to the Sangha.
9 & 10. Close family participating in pouring water into a bowl until overflow as the Sangha chants.
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Abstract

In Buddhism, as practiced in Sri Lanka in its earliest form, religion has no place at events marking the stages of life – birth of a child (with no practice similar to baptism), puberty of a girl (koṭahalu mangula) (a particularity of Sinhala Buddhism, with no similar event for boys), or marriage, each of them celebrated as a civil affair. When it comes to death, however, Buddhism comes to be involved heavily, the presence of monks (SEE PICTURE.), at home, or at the burial grounds, being the norm. Indeed this is one of the key occasions when the Buddha’s Teachings come to be personalized for the masses.

First, it is of relevance and benefit to both the deceased and the survivors. Both aspects of death — the message of impermanence, and the opportunity to help the departed loved one — find expression in the Buddhist funeral ceremony. For the deceased, it marks the moment when the transition begins to a new mode of existence within the round of rebirths. For the living, death is a powerful reminder of the Buddha’s teaching on impermanence. It also provides an opportunity to assist the deceased person as he or she fares on to the new existence. But it also an opportunity to gain a little more maturity regarding life and death.

This is a study in Oral History. The methodology thus used is that of participant observation. But it is more than the dualistic paradigm of a researcher doing research on subjects. The author of the paper is both researcher and among the researched. So his role may be said to be that of participant observer. While the paper is indeed a reporting of research findings, it is not merely that. The paper ends in a critical analysis. To that extent the author may be characterized as a developmental participant observer. The subject of how Buddhists cope with death come from his personal experience in relation to his father’s death, but yet it is an objective study of the ritual of the funeral ceremony. Methodologically speaking again, the paper may then be seen as one that bridges the cold academy with warm field work and between researcher and the researched. To the extent that the paper is in oral history, there is little theory building, and references to other academic studies. But the framework of the paper is no less analytical and theoretical. If the photos included in this essay may be seen to take away from the aura of academicity, it may be seen as adding colour and brightness to academic writing.
PART A: Dealing with The Death of a Loved One

1. Introduction: A Peek at Theory

Death is viewed by Buddhists as a natural outcome of Life, under the Principle of Change (*anicca*, literally, ‘impermanence’) as taught by the Buddha. Life, likewise, is seen as a natural outcome of Death, again under the same principle. This would be no different from the night following day following night, each conditioned as under his Principle of Conditioned Co-origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Understanding death as the common fate of one and all can be said to be the singlemost reason why Buddhists come to be relatively less traumatized by the spectre of death. At a theoretical level, Death is a ‘Thirst’ (*tañhā*). It is a Thirst because Life is a ‘Thirst to be’ (*bhava tañhā*). So Death, the other side of the coin, could only but be a ‘Thirst to be not’ (*vibhava tañhā*). The ‘Thirst to be’ comes to be so very attractive to a sentient being (*satto*), meaning both human or animal, that they yearn to have more of it. And that in a very next life, since even at the end of this life, one has not been satiated enough. But, logically considered, to be born again, one has to first die. Thus, yearning to have a taste of the delicious servings just one more time, they come to be born again. The yearning continuing each life time, one comes to die and die and be born again and again in a life cycle. This is what is called Rebecoming (*punabbhava*), popularly Rebirth.

All this is nice theory. But, even as the theory is understood and accepted, it is not to say that death is not devastating to the family, relatives, friends and acquaintances. But the Sinhala Buddhists turn death into an occasion for personal reflection, the departed becoming an immediate example of the theoretical understanding.

In this Chapbook, the reader will find a Pictorial view of the ‘death ceremony’ (*avamangallotsavaya*) of my State-honoured father, Kalaguru (Maestro of the Arts) S H Sauris Silva, that took place in 1982 in Sri Lanka. If it is by way of seeking to bring history alive, and of showing respect to my departed father, it has also handed me an opportunity to look at how death is handled by the Sinhala Buddhist society of Sri Lanka. It may be noted that this is as I remember it, and upon no particular in depth study.

2. Home to Cemetery

To begin then, it is the custom to keep the dead body at home until disposal, embalmed if kept for a few days. In an urban setting, it may be kept in a funeral parlour, particularly if the dead person is of some social standing, as my father was (SEE PICTURE).

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2. The late Sauris Silva lies-in-state at Funeral Parlor, a crown worn by him at his dance performances placed above his head. The casket skirt shows birth (upata) (1898) and death (vipata) (1982). Two tusks stand guard, with a dhammacakka wheel at the back centre.
Additional respect may be shown (as in the picture) by having two elephant tusks placed in front, making an arch. The body, dressed in the favourite or the common attire of the deceased, is placed in the casket with the head pointing towards the West, possibly symbolizing the setting sun, and the end of life, and is kept open for public viewing. One or two standing brass oil lamps with wicks lit may be kept at the head of the body, in reverence, as at a temple when oil wicks in a holder are lit in honour of the Buddha. Any wreaths and cards received are placed around the casket, and a photo of the deceased, if available, displayed as well.

Family, and everyone informed of the passing away, a white flag may be put up outside the house to signal the event, this by the more socially conscious At home, a vigil is kept 24 hours of the day, family members and relatives taking turns. If this is to symbolize that the family has not abandoned the deceased, it is also intended as a way of keeping out and discouraging any possible evil forces, as is the cultural belief. Those on the wake may chant some Suttas such as the *satipaññhāna* or the less informed, engage in games such as carom or play cards.

At a material level in a domestic setting, the pictures on the walls, if any, are turned backwards, possibly wanting to avoid ushering in family memories, associated with the departed one in particular, and also showing a solidarity with the departed one who now can’t be party to the memories. No food is cooked at home for the duration. This could well be for hygienic reasons, even if the body may be embalmed. But culturally speaking, it may be a symbolic, and a more tangible, show of solidarity with the dead relative. How could I possibly eat when my loved cannot? The neighbours show their respect and solidarity for the family by providing (donating) food for the duration, every family in the community, of course, benefiting from the practice over time under a principle of mutuality.

The mourners, family or other, come to be dressed in white, the colour of purity in Buddhism.

With no religious directives as to the form of disposal of the body in a lay community setting, the norm, for practical reasons, is burial, at the closest cemetery. For those who can afford - making a funeral pyre in particular being an expensive affair, or if volunteers offer to bring enough firewood, cremation may be an option. In contemporary times, the cremation may be at the cemetery crematorium.

Again with no religious or social requirement of a particular deadline, the date of burial or cremation comes to be determined by how soon the relatives, the critical ones in particular, could attend the event.

On the day of the disposal, everyone goes by the casket paying their last respects, or letting out their final emotions through crying (as I did, to give an example, at my mother’s funeral) or in whatever way one comes to express one’s feelings. After a final announcement, the lid is closed, with wreaths etc., if any, placed on the casket.

As in the case of my father, at a Funeral parlour, a drummer and a wind-instrument player (*nalaawa*) announces the preparation for departure (SEE PICTURE), with a performance of a standard rhythm and beat. The drum used is the *tammaettama*, double-faced drum, face up, played with sticks. (see https://www.lanka.com/about/interests/traditional-drums/ for a picture of this and some other drums).

Following the announcement, the processional falls into place (SEE PICTURE).
The casket, carried on the shoulders of family (SEE PICTURE), friends and colleagues taking turns, is then taken in a processional, led by the musicians (sometimes adding another type of drum called yakbere, played with hands on both sides). A parasol is held over the casket (as in the picture), the same way a living Emperor would be treated, the parasol symbolizing regal honour. Relatives, friends and colleagues following the casket, the pathway comes to be carpeted with clean white sheet lengths (pāvāda) (as in the picture), the sheets already gone past by brought to the front by volunteers. The processional ends up at the cemetery, when the musicians retire, and there is no more music.
5. Casket carried by son Sugunasiri and nephew Chandrasena and others. A white parasol over the casket symbolizes the royal-like respect. In front are the paavaada, clean white cloth covering the route of the procession, white being the colour of purity and cleanliness in Sinhala Buddhist culture.

6. Mourners joining the processional.
3. The Ritual

The ceremony at the cemetery may begin with memorial speeches (SEE PICTURE), rounded out by a thank you speech by a family member. This is when the religious ritual begins, this in Pali, the language in which Buddhism was brought to Lanka by Arahant Mahinda (3rd c. BCE), and committed to writing for the first time, in the 1st century BCE.

Now we present the ritual in outline.

3.1 Opener

3.1.1 Homage to the Buddha

I pay Homage to the Fully Enlightened Buddha
(namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammàsambuddhassa).

This opener brings the family and community together to collectively bring the presence of the Buddha to their minds. The trust placed in him can be said to become a source of comfort, and an implicit reminder of the reality of death as a natural part of life, as is his Teaching.

3.1.2 Seeking the Triple Refuge

By the Triple Refuge (tisarana) are meant the Buddha, Dhamma (Teachings) and Sangha (Disciples), this last being a reference not to the fourfold Sangha – bhikkhu, bhikkhunī, upāsaka, upāsikā, but to the Arahants ‘Worthy Ones’ of the past, present and future, who have come by their liberation following the Teachings of the Buddha. And the words go as follows:

- Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi ‘I seek refuge in the Buddha’
- Dhammaṁ saraṇam gacchāmi ‘I seek refuge in the Dhamma’
- Sanghaṁ saraṇam gacchāmi ‘I seek refuge in the Sangha’.
The lines are repeated three times, strengthening the feeling of comfort of the bereaved that they are assured of the benefit of Buddha’s compassion and wisdom, as contained in the Dhamma, and the experience of the Sangha who have liberated themselves, walking the Path as shown by the Buddha.

3.1.3 Five Training Principles (aka Precepts) (sikkhāpada)

\[\text{Pāṇātipārā \ veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi.} \]
I abstain from taking life.

\[\text{Adinnādānā \ veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi.} \]
I abstain from what is not given.

\[\text{Kāmesu micchācārā \ veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi.} \]
I abstain from sexual misconduct.

\[\text{Musāvādā \ veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi.} \]
I abstain from false language

[Implicit here is not only lying, but also slander, backbiting, foul language.]

\[\text{Surāmeraya majjapamādaṭṭhānā \ veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi.} \]
I abstain from going overboard on liquor, intoxicants and drugs.

This is the basic self-training of a Buddhist, not imposed from outside, or by an authority figure, but from within oneself. Thus it is self-regulated, which incidentally is what allows it to be practised by any one of any religion or no religion. To be reminded of the Training Principles at the death of a loved one, then, may serve the bereaved as a visible reminder, helping also to bring to memory the life of the deceased one along the five Training Principles. It may be with pleasure if the deceased has lived up to them or with concern if otherwise, most, of course, falling in between. But his again may be a reminder to the bereaved of the reality of life.

3.2 ‘Memory Cloth Offering’ [to Sangha] (mataka-vattha pūjā)

If the above three items are standard to any Buddhist event, now we come to the critical part of the ritual, both in psychological and liberational terms, this taking much longer than the opener (as above).

In the first part, merit is transferred to the deceased. But for merit to be transferred, the giver needs to have first acquired it. This is, of course, initially gained with the general practice of paying Homage (as in items 3.1.1-2 above) to the Triple Gem, and reminding oneself of the self-restraint (3.1.3). But now the merit is earned in a more tangible and explicit way, with the offering of the \text{pamsukāla}, meaning ‘rags from a dust heap’, to the Sangha. Historically, those ordained under the Buddha, with no personal possessions, relied on any kind of cloth thrown away, cleaning and washing them, and then cutting up and dying them, to make robes. But today what is offered is a length of white cloth, to be cut up and turned into robes which are then dyed in yellow or brown.

\[\text{The pamsukāla comes to be offered by the family gathered around and near the coffin as they repeat the words after a Sangha member, in Pali:} \]

\[\text{Kālakatānaññ no \ nātinaññ puññathāyā} \]
For the merit-benefit of our deceased relatives

\[\text{Imāni matakavatthāni bhikkhusanghassa dema.} \]
This memory cloth we offer to the Bhikkhu Sangha.
The practice can be said to bring the deceased to the centre and forefront of one's consciousness, if also any others who have already passed away, as intended by the plurals kālakatānam and ātānam.

Next, as the offering is handed over by a family member to a Sangha member physically (SEE PICTURE), the Sangha members chant the following lines, thrice:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Impermanent indeed are Forces,} \\
&\text{Aniccā vata samkhārā} \\
&\text{And of the nature of rise and fall.} \\
&\text{Uppāda vaya dhammino.} \\
&\text{Having arisen, they cease to be.} \\
&\text{Uppajjhitvā nirujjhanti} \\
&\text{Calming them is bliss.} \\
&\text{Tesam vūpasamo sukho.}
\end{align*}
\]

The words are clearly a Dhammic Reminder, if only confirming what is known and accepted in the culture, but now made to come home in the context of the death of the relative. But if this is a way of bringing solace to the bereaved through knowledge, the calming and the soothing come from the monotonous mode of delivery, the mourners all listening in with folded palms and heads bowed. In the chanting style called sarabhāṇa (vowel intoning) and approved by the Buddha, each word is stretched out up to about 8-16 syllables (mātrā), the words and the lines sung in unison in a slow rhythm, rendering it sonorously soothing. Additional solace is the knowledge and sense that this seals in action the words of the earlier merit transfer (puṇṇānumodanā).

3.3 Homily (Baṇa) and Transfer of Merit

3.3.1 Homily

Baṇa ‘homily’ is the elucidation of the Dhamma, and is the second and closing segment of the transferring of merit. Up to now, solace for the relatives and mourners has come through the
personal participation, transferring merit in action and words. But now it comes through education when those present come to be provided with knowledge about the Buddha’s Teachings. The homily begins with the Sangha speaker talking about what is known about the good deeds of the deceased. But then it would be expanded to make it a lesson in Dhamma, drawn upon the Buddha’s words and their own personal experience. If it adds to the knowledge base of the listener, it helps to bring the realization that while they are mourning the loss of the loved one, it is only a case study of the reality that befalls one and all. Death now comes to be not something to agonize over but something to be accepted, and a reality to be built into one’s own personal life.

The homily lasting for about half an hour or more, the participants are next reminded of how in the past hour or so they have participated in transferring merit, by first accruing it through offerings to the Sangha and listening to the chanting. The Sangha leader then invites the mourners to make a final wish for the benefit of the departed, but ostensibly also to other departed as well:

‘May this accrue to my relatives; may wellness be unto them’
(idam me ŋātinam hotu / sukhītā hontu ŋātayo).

The generalizing, as earlier, may be to de-focus the mind on the immediately deceased, thus minimize the sorrow.
But this is not quite the ending.

### 3.3.2 Symbolic transfer of merit to the deceased

If the homily is what helps brings knowledge of the Truth of reality, as also the Buddha’s Teachings, and the verbal transfer and the offering of cloth for robes a personal calming, closure for the family comes with a final transfer of Blessings to the deceased in a symbolic gesture.

For this, the immediate family members of the deceased gather around close to the monks
(see pictures), and come to be in a circle, squatting, with a jug full of water and a bowl sitting on a deep dish in front of them. As they begin to pour the water into the bowl, the Sangha begin to chant in unison again, and in the sarabhaṅga musical intoning, words that bring a visual imagery:

Just as rivers full of water
Fills the ocean to its capacity
Just so from what is given
[merit] accrues to the departed!

As water moving along on a hill
Flows down to the hollow vale,
Just so from what is given
[merit] accrues to the departed.

(Tirokudda Sutta of the Khuddakapāṭha)

The overflowing, of course, is symbolic, to give the sense that the merit would overflow for the benefit of the deceased. It also brings a sense of satisfaction, if also an ‘altruistic happiness’ (muditā) to the family that the deceased has been given something beneficial for the life’s sojourn. It also brings closure to a harrowing few days, in the thought that one stage of the life of the deceased has come to an end, and that it is on its way to another, the hope being that it would be a good or better one.
3.4 Care for the Living

Up to now, the focus has been on the deceased. But of course, the living have to go on living. So the ritual includes a positive message for them, captured in a chanting:

Whatever you wished or wanted, \( \text{icchitam patthitam tuyham} \)
may it quickly be. \( \text{khippameva samijjhatu} \)
May all your expectations be fulfilled
as the moon upon the fifteenth day, \( \text{sabbe parentu sankappā} \)
[and] as the wish-fulfilling gem. \( \text{cando pannaraso yathā} \)
\( \text{mani jotiraso yathā}. \)

At this point, the casket if open is sealed.

4. Follow-up

Religious blessings over, the Sangha leaves, ushering in closure. The casket is carried, again on shoulders, to the burial pit, and then taken around it, walking clockwise, with right shoulder in \( \text{(padakkhinā)} \), this in imitation of the practice of circumambulating a Bodhi Tree or a Thupa (burial mound). At the end of it, the casket is lowered. Then, everyone present, beginning with the family, would throw a fistful of the dugout soil, the casket finally coming to be fully covered with the soil.

The day ends with the mourners returning to the home of the deceased where they are treated to a simple meal of rice, pumpkin \( \text{(vaññakka)} \) and salt fish. While pumpkin is believed to be good for the heart, the salt fish seeks to replenish the drained tears.

In the case of a cremation, the ashes are collected the next day, and dealt with by a given family member in whatever way is agreed upon – bury in a burial pit in the cemetery or dispersed in an open stretch of water. But in general, it is the practice if, again, of the better known individuals, to have a monument set up in honour at the place of burial (of body or ashes). In an urban setting in particular, wife and husband may be buried in adjacent plots, and possibly other members of the nuclear family, too.

While the funeral ceremony brings closure to the family, it is the general practice for the family not to engage in lavish events, or entertainment of any kind, for a year or so. This is not so much for reasons of mourning, but to continue to show respect to the memory of the loved one.

But it is not only respect that the deceased receives. For, it is the practice to offer alms to the Sangha, at the end of 7, 30 and 90 days, and one year. Thereafter, offering of alms is made every year, on the death anniversary. A feature of this memorial event is a ‘memory homily’ \( \text{(mataka baṇa)} \), when the night before the almsgiving, the Sangha is invited for a \( \text{paritta ‘protection’} \) chanting, done in the same \( \text{sarabhaṇa} \) style, followed by a homily. As at the funeral ceremony, the Sangha leads the relatives in the recitation of the necessary stanzas to transfer the merits acquired, by organizing the event, to the deceased. Following this, a gift of a kind is offered to the monk. Upon the departure of the Sangha, the invitees are served with dinner or refreshments, as they would be following the almsgiving.

The almsgiving offers benefit to three parties. One, of course, is the Sangha who receive the food. But that is nothing special, since the Sangha always receive alms, begging from home to home in traditional times, and where the practice is no longer common, particularly in the city, the food offered at the temple, or by invitation to the home. The intent of the almsgiving is to transfer merit to the deceased. Personal involvement in the food preparation, of course, prolongs the time of active memory of the deceased. But the beneficiary is also the family, the almsgiver. To transfer merit, merit must be accrued. It is thus that an alms offering brings a triple benefit.
And if the alms are prepared with the intent of just offering alms, then what one gains is called pin, which is conducive to earning a place in Heaven, such as Tusita, in the afterlife. But if in the preparation of the alms the intent is cultivating the good in oneself, and is part of self-discipline, and to in particular cultivate detachment, then what is gained is called kusal, which can contribute towards the Path to Nibbana.

The almsgiving event, of course, is also an occasion for family reunion, and community gathering. If this brings happiness, to both family and community, it also serves as a ‘continuing closure’.

PART B: Discussion

The Funeral Ceremony

As seen in this paper, Buddhism, as practiced by Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka [1], can be seen to play several roles in the context of death in a family, rolled into one. To begin with, it is Mother, and the compassionate Social Worker, who lends a shoulder to cry on. Then it is the Community Worker that pulls in the religious community in a time of need. It is also the Psychologist that digs out the deep roots of the ailment from which the bereaved suffer, becoming also the theoretician. Next, it is the Psychiatrist that seeks to heal, based in the analysis of the Psychologist. Finally, it is the compassionate and wise Spiritual Guide that helps bring closure to a sad event, and for lamenting and mourning individuals, family and community.

If Social Worker, Community Worker, Psychologist, Psychiatrist and Spiritual Guide draw an image of the professional, the fact that the Sangha is dressed in yellow, in contradistinction to the white worn by the laity, serve as a clear distinguishing marker of the former as professional. The Sangha being seated on chairs, while others stand or sit on the ground or floor, adds to the professional standing. The laity standing or sitting with folded palms can be said to more than confirm in the minds of the family and community that they are indeed the clear beneficiaries of the professionalism of the Sangha.

Mother /Social Worker

Now to elaborate on each of the dimensions, how is Buddhism the symbolic Mother and the compassionate Social Worker, who lend a shoulder to cry on? It needs to be noted, again, in this connection that Buddhism, as practiced by the Sinhalas of Lanka [2], does not participate in the stages of life of the individual such as birth, coming of age and marriage. This, of course, is not to say that a couple may not go to the temple, preceding, but more likely following, marriage, or a newborn may not be taken to the temple for a blessing of a paritta (‘protection’) chanting, a ritual that is practiced in relation to events like house-warming, beginning of a school year, illness in the family, etc. The first reading of letters to a child may also be done by a member of the Sangha, or by a community elder, both standing for wisdom. But these are all individual decisions of families.

In contrast, Buddhism can be said to come out in all its full gentle force when it comes to death. If the presence of the Sangha at the cemetery or home (prior to the body being taken to the cemetery) shows this, the fact that they come not singly but collectively, as a group, and perhaps drawing upon more than one temple in the area [3], speaks volumes as to a Social Worker. But it is not just the body count, but that every single member present participates in the process directly, however minimally, as e.g., in chanting. It may be noted that the proceedings begin with going for Refuge not only in the Buddha and the Dhamma, but also Sangha. And, true to the words, lo
and behold, there is the Sangha, doing exactly that – coming out in full strength, as a Refuge in a time of need, and not just as the impersonal spiritual Refuge, to help the bereaved family on the ground to overcome their grief. Their presence throughout the ceremony provides enough assurance, and insurance, that the family and community will leave the cemetery shedding less tears, more relieved and relatively calmer than when they arrived for the funeral and before the showing up of the Sangha.

**Community Worker**

It was said, as a second point, that Buddhism is the *Community Worker* that pulls in the religious community in a time of need. The Sangha is not known to go out of their way in community work, the general practice being that the community comes to them, becoming the recipients of sustenance. But here at the point of death, it is the other way around; they come to the community. Of course, the reversal of roles is what contributes to the Sangha becoming Social Worker. If providing a shoulder to cry on can be seen as the practice of *mettā* ‘friendliness’, leaving the temple to help out the community can be seen as the practice of *karunā* ‘compassionate action’. This again adds confidence to the practice of Going for Refuge in the Sangha as in the Opener.

**Psychologist**

Thirdly it was said that Buddhism is also the *Psychologist* that digs out the deep roots of the ailment from which the bereaved suffers, becoming also the theoretician. The *Homily*, which takes the largest chunk of time in the funeral ceremony, is where this can be seen best. [4] The Sangha speaker, joining the family in speaking about the deceased, then goes into a detailed exposé of one or another point of Dhamma, through textual quotations, personal knowledge, anecdote, history and any other number of sources, relating all this, throughout or at the end, to the reality of death as part of life. A key point that emerges in this context would be how death is a Thirst (*taõhā*), specifically, the ‘Thirst to be not’ (*vibhava taõhā*), and how it comes to be conditioned by the Thirst to be (*bhava taõhā*), namely birth. And how it is the elimination of Birth alone that could eliminate death, the cause of the present grief and lamentation. The message – as to the direct relevance of working towards Nibbana, which is indeed the end of birth, couldn’t be better timed. But it would also be pointed out that our suffering is based in a third Thirst, a day to day and moment to moment Thirst, namely Sense Thirst (*kàma taõhā*). And here a reference may be made to how the self-restraint in terms of the five Training Principles could help them in taming this third Thirst.

In the end, the bereaved may be left asking themselves the immediate question, “Why continue to be bereaved when in fact death is as normal as breathing in and out?” But the community, different individuals to different degrees, of course, may also go away with a higher sensitivity to the reason for death as being birth itself, and convinced that the answer to their suffering, and the way to put an end to death, is indeed putting an end to birth. And also that the way to minimize suffering in life would be to watch one’s sense thirsts.

The knowledge may not have come through comprehensively in this single session. But participating in many a death event or other religious event over a lifetime, the community can be said to gain more and more understanding of the basic Teachings of the Buddha. These are the Four Noble Truths, set in a medical paradigm:
Identification: Suffering (=death and bereavement) (*dukkha* ‘cross-fit’); 
Diagnosis: Cause for suffering (*samudaya* ‘arising’); 
Prognosis: Possibility that the suffering can be ended (*nirodha* ‘cessation’); and 
Prescription: Way out of suffering (*magga* ‘path’).

The path (Prescription) is the Noble Eightfold Path:

- **Right View** (*sammā diṭṭhi*);
- **Right Intent and Conceptualization** (*sammā samkappa*);
- **Excellent Language** (*sammā vācā*);
- **Excellent Conduct** (*sammā kammanta*);
- **Excellent Livelihood** (*sammā ājāva*);
- **Excellent Mental Effort** (*sammā vàyāma*);
- **Excellent Mindfulness** (*sammā sati*);
- **Excellent Concentration** (*sammā samādhi*).

But a simple guideline that has helped the Sinhala Buddhists in living the Buddhist life may be the Eightfold Wheel of Life Reality (*attīthalokadhamma cakka*) – gain and loss, infamy and fame, blame and praise, happiness and suffering:

$lābho alābho ayaso yaso ca$;  
*nindā pasamsā sukham ca dukkham*.

Interestingly, and by mere chance discovery, my late father provides a living example of this in practice (see his Autobiography in this Chapbook). The consummate community worker that he was, watching the unfair hand meted out to the teachers, he, as a School Principal himself, took on the establishment. The result was to make his professional life simply impossible, even putting his life in danger. When fellow teachers, alarmed by it all, approach him, his response was to calm them with a question: “Is it, or is it not, the case that life has been injected into the body with the nails of suffering and comfort?” Then he adds, “Next to the hill was the abyss, and within danger was a good.” He characterizes how he “saw the light of justice” in relation to one or another of his struggles, by “building steps with the slabs cut of the very same pits, and emerging out of it successfully.” Continuing to appease the alarmed colleagues, he adds that danger, in fact, “has come in search of him … filled with good fortune”, proving them to be “not stones but flowers”!

If the Homily is then the educational platform that brings up (as in the sense of bringing up a child) the Sinhala Buddhists over a lifetime, the teaching of the Eightfold Wheel of Life Reality can be said to have rendered them to be the ‘Smiling Brown’ as they have come to be characterized, by foreigners in particular – a contented people, accepting death and suffering as reality, and going through them all with a smile, even as they struggle in their day to day living, but always with the knowledge in the background as to how to work towards liberation, should they so desire sometime during their life. Whether the knowledge gained is going to be short-lived or long-lived, or how seriously one would benefit from it, or whether one takes to meditation in search of calm and insight, are all, of course, up to the individual, as is the licence allowed by the Buddha:
“Do not be led by the authority of religious texts, nor by logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight of speculative opinion, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea ‘This is our Teacher’. But when you know for yourself.”

(Kalama Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya).

Psychiatrist

Next, Buddhism was said to be the Psychiatrist that seeks to heal, based in the analysis of the Psychologist. There is first, at the death ceremony, the transfer of merit to the deceased, this in both tangible and intangible ways. Following the Refuge, a length of cloth is given to the Sangha even as those present say the words, ‘May this Memory Cloth be offered to the Sangha for the purpose of merit for the deceased’. The ceremony ends with the family pouring water allowing it to overflow as the Sangha characterizes the process with the words, “Just as the water that flows fills the ocean to its capacity, just so from what is given, [merit] accrue to the deceased!” If the association of tears with the water could not be missed, it may even help grieve more but without letting it out. The activity also brings the muditā ‘altruistic happiness’, i.e., happiness in the happiness of others, in the mourners, it being more immediate and grounded, in that it is related to the deceased.

Then there are the intangible ways when the Sangha chant the words,

‘Forces are impermanent indeed,
and of the nature of arising and cessation.
Having arisen they die.
Calming them is happiness’.

The term translated here as ‘happiness’ is sukha. And the listener cannot fail to see its association with dukkha – that it is the opposite. Even though the participants may not know the Pali words themselves, the association itself can be said to be sufficient for them to make the connection. This is particularly so due to the proximity of Sinhala to Pali [5]. Indeed both terms have their close parallel in Sinhala: dukkha is duka; sukha is suvaya.

The Psychiatrist can then be seen to be at its (his/her?) best when, most innovatively and creatively, the chanting is done in the rhythmic sarabhaṅga ‘vowel intoning’. It can only be said to resonate with, to make a bold claim here, the musicality inherent to sentience, but also help take away the brooding and the melancholia, if only momentarily, but with the effect lasting longer.

Spiritual Guide

Finally, it was said that Buddhism is the compassionate and wise Spiritual Guide that helps bring closure to a lamenting and mourning community, family and individuals. First it is the very presence of the Sangha at the mournful hour that makes the link to spirituality. Then is the fact that the material drawn upon by the Sangha is directly from the Canon itself, the words in pouring water, e.g., coming from the Tirokudda Sutta of the Khuddaka Nikaya. Third is the fact that the consoling comes from the very embodiment of the Third Refuge, representing those who have gained personal liberation (i.e., become Arahants) from the very teachings that they themselves have heard today. All this can be said to lend credibility to the healer, ‘faith in the healer’ being a critical component of healing, just as Trust in the Buddha can be in working one’s way towards Nibbana.
Then there is, of course, the continuing and ongoing spiritual guidance, beginning with the Buddhapuja ‘Homage to the Buddha’, as done at the beginning of the ritual, a practice that will be, or can be, continued at home on a regular if not a daily basis. The Five Training Principles, which is part of the Buddhapuja, serve as reminders for self-restraint, with the potential to lead one to liberation through continued and extended practice. By way of extension is the practice of observing the Eight Training Principles on Full Moon Days. All this, of course, is not to mention meditation, samādhi ‘concentration’ being one of the seven ‘Factors contributive to Enlightenment’ (bojjhanga) [6].

Closure

Healing for the Living

So we can see that the death ritual in Sinhala Buddhism, in its multiple roles of Mother / Social Worker, Community Worker, Psychologist, Psychiatrist and Spiritual Guide, brings out the pragmatic best of the Buddha’s Teachings. It can be seen to render a fourfold service. First, it provides the opportunity to help the departed loved one. Second, it helps a grieving community out of it, providing the immediate family in particular the satisfaction of a benediction for their wishes and expectations to come true. Third it provides a platform to hone in the message of impermanence, and the way out of suffering. Finally, it also strengthens the link between the community and the monastic Sangha.

In this process we see Buddhism drawing upon and relying on both the intellectual in the left brain hemisphere and the emotional in the right brain hemisphere. It also provides an example of a form of spirituality that is both intellectual and theoretical, but yet pragmatic, allowing for down to earth application. In all this, what we see is the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha, who claims to only teach two things: suffering and the way out of suffering. If the death related ceremony does not lead one to liberation, it serves as an example of how his Teachings come to be grounded and applied for the well-being of sentient beings.

Facilitating Dying in Peace

Now if the ceremony is to bid farewell to the deceased loved one, but also provide closure and comfort to the living, one thing that we survivors may be encouraged to do is to make up our minds to see if in the future we could help a dying relative die in peace. This can be done with words that may help the diseased be reminded of the reality that death is natural and inevitable, and also that one has had a hand in one’s own death and that it is in nobody else’s hand. All of us come according to our own kamma (deeds) and all of us go according to our deeds! By way of encouragement, and appeasement, the loved one can be encouraged to reflect upon the good deeds done by oneself in this life, pointing out that these wholesome deeds would lead to a good rebirth, and be supportive in his next life [7]. This way the dying person could be prepared to accept death easier than otherwise.

Here then are some helpful words from the text:

We are the Maker of our kamma, their Heir, their Birthplace, their Relative, their Refuge. Whatever we do, good or bad, destined are we to receive them as inheritance.
We ourselves could do something, too, not leaving all the work to the dying one. That is to radiate mettā (loving-kindness) to ease the suffering of the sick person. Sitting in a comfortable posture, you could begin radiating mettā to yourself, for you cannot give what you don’t have. Then mettā can be radiated to the sick person. You may mentally use words like,

‘May you be well and happy.
May you be free from suffering.
May you be in good health.
May you be at peace’.

Feeling the peaceful compassion developing in your mind, you may seek to envelop the sick person in it. And you may want to feel the vibrations that come with the compassion, enveloping the sick person’s body [9]. Dhamma friends who are meditation practitioners could, of course, be invited to do likewise.

The Sangha may also be invited to chant Paritta ‘Protection’, this in the ‘intoning’ rhythm, as the patient holds a thread, held at the other end by the Sangha, with relatives possibly holding it, too.

These, then, are some ways that the process of death can be facilitated, to help the loved one die in peace.

PART C: Arahant Mahinda as Redactor of the Funeral Ceremony

If we have sought to establish Buddhism in the context of death, and overall life by extension, as Mother/Social Worker, Community Worker, Psychologist, Psychiatrist and Spiritual Guide folded into one, we may wonder as to who might have been knowledgeable, and experienced enough to come up with such a pragmatic ceremony. Although I provide little evidence, I would like to suggest that it may possibly be the same hand that is behind the Buddhapuja itself. And that is Arahant Mahinda, the one who introduces Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the 3rd c. BCE, and I have sought to show as the Redactor of the Buddhapuja [10]. I do this on the basis of internal evidence of the quality (15 of them) he brings to his task. To list the more relevant ones here: Visionary (4), Psychologist (7), Educator (8), Strategic Planner (9), Conceptualizer (11), effective Dhamma Messenger (12), Pragmatist (13), and Authority Figure (15) (Sugunasiri, 2012, 132-133).

While we shall not go into all these dimensions, we could take one indicative example from the Funeral Ceremony itself, showing an educational, psychological, psychiatric and social worker hand worthy of an Arahant Mahinda.

During the ritual of pouring water and letting it overflow, the Sangha chants the words petānam upakappati. literally ‘Accrues to the departed’, the reference here being to petas, the lowest of the lowest sentient existence. According to the Buddha, it is only those who have been reborn as petas that are capable of benefiting from a transfer of merit (Anguttara Nikaya v, 269ff.). So taken in this strict sense, one’s deceased relative can benefit from their merit transfer only if s/he had lived a life in violation of the Training Principles (aka Precepts). Taking that the deceased relative was indeed so, there is the satisfaction that at least the transferred merit may help catapult him/her away from it.
However, the moot point of such refinement is lost on the average mourner, and the specific bereaved relatives. All they know, and want to believe, is that they are doing something beneficial for the departed loved one. It is the satisfaction gained of sharing the thought that brings healing. And, of course, if the deceased perchance has indeed been born a peta literally, it would be gratifying to know that the ritual would serve as a sort of a merit insurance.

Where the cleverness of the hand behind the funeral ritual shows is that no such transfer is intended in the first place! In an earlier verse where transferring good thoughts were intended, we may note that the ending was –tu, (singular) and –ntu (plural), the lines meaning ‘May this accrue to my relatives; may wellness be unto them’ (idam me ŋāṭinam hotu / sukhitā hontu ŋāṭayyo). But the lines in the context of pouring water over end with the the third person suffix –ti, merely descriptively, petānam upakappati, literally meaning ‘accrues to the departed’.

So what we then have is a case where the listener is appeased, but the ritual not compromising the Buddha’s Teachings. The lines are authentic as is the benefit to the bereaved.

That Arahant Mahinda is a maestro when it comes to meeting the needs of the audience is well seen in the choices he makes on his very first encounter in Lanka. For the King and his retinue, invariably males joining him in a hunt, he chooses the Culahatthipadopama Sutta which deals with the Buddha’s qualities, virtues and accomplishments, and how these could be fully appreciated only when one followed his Teachings and practiced it. Here he is clearly, tapping exclusively to the rational side of man, and the left brain hemisphere. But when it comes to the Women of the Royal Household, including a junior Queen Anula, his choice is Petavatthu and Vimanavatthu that deal with spirits of the dead in the (suffering) peta and (happy) deva worlds, according to their past kamma. Here Arahant Mahinda is appealing to an audience already possessing faith in the spirit world. But yet are also included the Four Noble Truths. Thus he is tapping into both the right and the left brain hemispheres. And when it comes to the masses, he picks Deavaduta Suttanta where the masses would hear of the results of good and bad actions, the misery that awaits criminals, and the descriptions of tortures in hell. If this shows a flexibility on his part, what it shows is a sensitivity to the audience.

But the cleverness doesn’t end there. While in the above context the Buddha does indeed indicate that a beneficiary from a transfer of merit can only be a peta, lowest of the lowest, in a different context, he seems to use the term peta in the literal sense of ‘one who has gone on’.

“I will distribute gifts on their behalf” (dakkhinam anuppadassãmiti) is one of five ways a son should undertake to minister to mother and father, the phrase used being ‘petānam kālakatānam’ (Digha Nikaya 3, 189), literally, ‘[to] the gone on forward / forth] (pa- + -ita), time done (kāla + katānam)’. The usage of peta here certainly doesn’t suggest that it refers to the lowest of the lowest, but simply ‘the time done, gone’. So it may be that the Buddha is hinting that transferring merit could very well be to any and every departed. Indeed that seems to be the way it has been interpreted by the Sinhala Sangha in the context of a funeral. So in selecting these particular lines (petānam upakappati) in the context of a funeral ceremony, Arahant Mahinda may well have been drawing upon this ambiguity. What this shows, then, is not only his deep knowledge of the Dhamma as an Arahant, but also the cleverness in picking lines that well serve the purpose of bringing comfort to the bereaved, but also allowing for both interpretations of the Buddha’s Teachings.

What is of real theoretical interest is that the ritual is put together in such a way that it well speaks to the Buddha’s Teaching of Asoulity (anattā). While we have a process of healing, educating, etc., there is no specific ‘healer’ or ‘educator’ as such, the process itself being all of that.

Now at whose hand could it happen except that of a deft hand as the one we see in Arahant Mahinda?
If what is behind the Funeral ritual of the Sinhala Buddhists, then, is the hand of a Social Worker, Psychologist, Psychiatrist and Spiritual Guide, this skilled and complex hand may well be that of Arahant Mahinda.

But with this little hint, I shall leave my hypothesis with future researchers.

Invitation

We conclude, then, by inviting the reader to enjoy the experience of reading this, giving permission to both your brain hemispheres, as you kindly empathize with the experience of a grieving sentient community, riding through a devastating life experience but coming out of it happier and more educated towards future happiness. We also invite you as well to participate in their experience and learn from it, and come out of it happier and educated towards your own future happiness, and be able to deal with your own immortality.

Thank you.

Wishing you the best in health and happiness!

Footnotes

[1] This only refers to the fact that the analysis is based in the practice as in Sri Lanka, but not to say it may not be, in some form or another, practised elsewhere in the Buddhist world, something we shall leave for the Anthropologist.

[2] I’m using here the term Sinhala instead of Sinhalese, for the reason that that is as used by the people of the country.

[3] The number of Sangha attending could run into hundreds, as e.g., in the case of a well-respected member of the community or a high level politician, who incidentally, unlike in the west, is not treated like dirt but held in respect as a public servant.

[4] Indeed the Homily (bana) can be said to be the educational platform of Sinhala Buddhism. It is an essential part of every religious activity – from temple-based Homage ceremonies held on the monthly Sabbath poya (Full Moon) days and every evening, to alms-giving as part of sustaining the Sangha and at annual or other death memorials, offered in a home setting or temple setting. It would also be part of any personal consultations, or public events where a Sangha member is invited to speak.

[5] Sinhala is not only close to Pali, but seems to sometimes reflect the Buddha’s Teachings even better than Pali. A case in point is how in Sinhala the concept of ‘asouility’ (anattā) (this is my translation) comes to be expressed grammatically. We have in Pali, e.g., vasso vassati ‘rain rains’ (as in the English word order), following Sanskrit varṣo varṣati, with the grammar of subject-verb, reflecting a ‘doer-action’ duality. This, of course, is what is challenged by the Buddha in his concept of Asouility. And it is this very concept that seems to be reflected in Sinhala. While in formal Sinhala there is still the subject verb concatenation as in Pali, in spoken Sinhala what we have is vahinava, meaning ‘rains’, where there is the Predicate but no Subject.

[6] The full list is as follows: mindfulness (sati), inner exploration (dhammavicaya), effort (viriya), happiness (piti), relaxation (passaddhi), concentration (samadhi) and equanimity (upekkha).

[7] The point, of course, could be made even without reference to rebirth. Bringing to mind
one’s good deeds of this life can surely bring only calm, regardless of one’s beliefs.

[8] The Pali lines are as cited in Ven. Dhammananda but with modifications in translation. He also adds a verse not in the Canon, but possibly in the Sinhala tradition:

   All beings come to death, they always have, and always will.
   In the same way surely will I die, too. Not a doubt do I have.

   (Sabbe sattā maranti ca, marimsu ca marissare,
   Tathevāham marissāmi, natthi me ettha samsayo.)

<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/33767>.

NOTES

1. I thank Ven. Udupihille Wimalabuddhi of the Toronto Mahavihara for sharing with me a first hand account of the ritual. And I thank my colleague, Dr. Bryan Levman, for his critical comments.

2. For more detail of the ritual itself, please see

3. Other references:
      <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/33767>.
‘Forces indeed are impermanent.’
‘May the happiness of Nibbana be to Mr S H Sauris Silva’
Birth 1898     Death 1982

11. The Final Journey, the banner showing the words “Impermanent indeed are Forces. May the Happiness of Nibbana be to Mr. S. H. Sauris Silva”.