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A Parting Word?
Buddhist and Shinto Funerary Practices in Japan

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I opened my diary to December 25th, 2001 and re-read an entry that I hadn't looked at in the intervening months since the funeral of Maya Ono, my teacher and my friend: "What a day. The sense of foreboding and of what I had to do kept me from feeling festive. I headed up to Maya's wake at three and was met in Jujo, Tokyo by some teachers from OLJ. The ceremonial aspects that I had to concentrate upon kept me from saying a true goodbye and this left me feeling bereft…"

Cultures do not mourn and bury their dead in a common fashion. No death is felt by the bereaved in a universal way. No person, no matter how familiar they are with the death rites and rituals of their own religion or culture or that of another can truly claim not to feel in some way unsettled when the matter of marking the passing of a loved one is at hand. My reaction, as a British woman attending the Buddhist funeral of my young Japanese friend was in equal parts one of sadness and confusion. The first emotion was perhaps a perfectly natural one, the second was due to my unfamiliarity with the rituals unfurling around me. I knew that as a former student of Maya's any faux pas that I committed would be forgiven, if indeed noticed at all, but I was nonetheless acutely aware of the fact that I had a role to play in marking her death, but had not been given my lines. Yet this desire to understand and explain was perhaps borne out of my discomfort at being one small part of an unfamiliar ritual played out in a language that I had in no way mastered. Would I have felt the same discomfort in attending a Christian burial in the United Kingdom? Unlikely. Do the Japanese focus on the minutiae of the wakes and funerals that they attend?

It is highly doubtful. Indeed, in Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan, Robert J. Smith states that: "A striking aspect of Japanese ritual is, in fact, the frequently encountered inability of participants and observers alike to offer any exegesis of it whatsoever… Actually this is not surprising… After all, ritual and ceremonial behaviour share with all behaviour the characteristic that they are both learned and taught…"

The Japanese are fond of saying that they are born into the Shinto faith, marry as Christians and die as Buddhists and whilst Shinto funerals are held, they are relatively uncommon. Nonetheless, in exploring the funerary practices of the Buddhist tradition and pinpointing the way in which Shinto practices differ from them I hope to understand some of the finer details that passed me by on that December day.

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Japanese life-cycle ceremonies play an important societal role, from the first shrine visit of a newborn child, through the coming-of-age ceremony at twenty, and onwards to marriage, to a funeral and beyond. The passage of the deceased to the grave is one that is governed by a series of clearly demarcated steps. Although there is a nomenclatural difference in the Buddhist and Shinto traditions, the actual practices are in many ways very similar.

Upon death, the body of the deceased is first washed. Traditionally this cleansing, or senrei, was originally performed by close family members, however it is now more common for mortuary assistants to undertake this task. The orifices of the deceased are then plugged with gauze or cotton before the body is dressed in a suit or a kimono. Where a kimono is to be worn it is fastened backwards. This is but one of several reversals enumerated by Jane M. Bachnik in Ceremony and Ritual in Japan, that are designed to encourage a muen botoke or directionless spirit to embark on its spiritual journey. The body lies on a single futon instead of the usual two, facing northwards instead of south or eastwards as the living do when asleep.

Once the body has been attired and in some cases made up, it is then placed on dry ice, for the practice of embalming is generally not used in Japan. This takes place either at the funeral parlour or at home. It is common for close family members to spend the night in the same room as the deceased. When the time comes for the body to be placed in the casket, a number of items are stowed alongside it. These traditionally include paper money, to pay the toll across the River of Three Hells and sundry items that the deceased may have been fond of in life, such as a favoured brand of cigarettes or sweets. This practice is also in evidence at the sites of fatal car accidents in Japan, where in addition to floral tributes, it is common to see an opened can of drink and cigarettes, sometimes lit and left to smoulder.

The funeral arrangements are not governed by any particular expeditiousness, however due attention is paid to the Japanese tradition of rokuyou or lucky and unlucky days. Each day of the year is attributed one of six characteristics ranging from taian, an auspicious day upon which weddings and other joyous celebrations are typically scheduled to occur, to butsumetsu, literally Buddha's death, when funerals are commonly held. Holding a funeral on tomobiki, the so-called 'trail day' is strictly taboo for its characters literally mean 'the pulling along of friends'. In order to accommodate these beliefs, funerals are invariably scheduled for the first butsumetsu following death. At this juncture the coffin, refreshments for the mourners, and funeral altar are chosen. Large artificial wreathes in black and white, called hanawa, are placed at the gate of the home or funeral parlour.

On the night before the funeral, mourners gather to pay their respects to the deceased at the otsuya or wake. Unless a mourner is particularly close to the deceased, he or she is generally not expected to attend both the wake and the funeral service.

A reception area, often tented, is set up at the entrance of the home or funeral parlour. Mourners coming to pay their respects first register their names and then present their condolence money. The amount of this monetary donation differs from person to person in relation to their perceived proximity to the deceased, although the sum of twenty thousand yen is common. In a marked

contrast to celebratory offerings, shinsatsu or new banknotes are not offered for to do so would be to imply that the death of the deceased has been planned or in someway premeditated. This offering is presented in a special envelope tied with a black and white ribbon with the amount given and the name of the donor inscribed on the front. There is some difference between the names given to these offerings in the Buddhist and Shinto faiths. In the Buddhist tradition this condolence money is referred to as okouden or gokouryo, literally translated as 'incense money'. At a Shinto wake it is called osakakiryou or 'money for a branch of the evergreen camellia tree' for this is offered in the place of incense. This differs from the branch of the same tree proffered at a Shinto funeral, for once it is wrapped in strips of white paper it is called tamagushi and the monetary offering is ontamagushiryou 'money for a paper wrapped branch of the evergreen camellia tree'.

In the Buddhist tradition, the wake is conducted by a priest or souryo, who faces the altar, bows, lights incense and then intones a sutra. As the sutra is being read the mourners make an offering of incense in the same fashion. This is conducted in a strict hierarchical manner, beginning with the closest family members of the deceased. A priest called a shinkan conducts a Shinto wake in a similar fashion. However, instead of incense the mourners carry branches of the evergreen camellia tree or sakaki, and place these before the altar. After the conclusion of the ceremony, the mourners are offered food and drink. The family will then generally pass the night with the deceased.

The funeral service is called a kokubetsushiki in the Buddhist faith or shinsousai in its Shinto counterpart and is generally conducted on the day after the wake. For both ceremonies the mourners are dressed in black suits or dresses, with women wearing no more than a string of pearls as jewellery. At a Buddhist funeral, the altar is decorated with a number of objects which include a wooden memorial tablet bearing the posthumous name of the deceased or kaimyou, a black ribbon-trimmed photograph of the deceased, fruit, sweets, candles, chrysanthemum flowers, an incense bowl and a bell. A Shinto altar bears a photograph and other decorations such as a sword or a mirror, uncooked food and a water bowl are used. In the Shinto tradition, a posthumous name is referred to as reiji, but serves the same purpose as the Buddhist kaimyou: by employing a different name for the deceased, it is believed that this will prevent their spirit from returning whenever their name is invoked. The number of characters used in a posthumous name tends to be greater in the Buddhist tradition[1]. [1]

The location of the funeral is of the utmost importance, for whilst in the Buddhist tradition it may be conducted at the temple, or otera, at home or at a ceremony hall, it is never conducted at a Shinto shrine or jinja because the Shinto faith abhors pollution and its shrines are considered to be both sacred and pure and as such must not be tainted by death.

Just as is the case at the wake, the Buddhist priest begins to intone a sutra and at a point shortly afterwards, incense is once again offered. Mourners carry a jyuzu, or Buddhist rosary. On this occasion, the mourners stands in turn before the incense urn, place their hands together in prayer or gasshou and then bow. Each mourner then takes a pinch of incense, raises it to their forehead and then places it in an urn prepared for this purpose. As a general rule this is

repeated three times. The mourner then bows deeply and returns to their place. At a Shinto funeral the mourners carry a branch of paper wrapped evergreen camellia or tamagushi with them to the altar. Where the Buddhist mourner joins their hands in prayer, the Shinto mourner performs what is known as nirei nihakushu ichirei or two bows, two handclaps and a single bow. The handclaps must be muted ones known as shinobite. At the end of a Buddhist funeral the mourners bow as the priest finishes the sutra and leaves the room. In the Shinto tradition a prayer called the norito heralds the end of the proceedings. The final stage of the funeral rites in both the Buddhist and the Shinto traditions is the cremation, for in Japan and especially in urban areas the cremation rate stands at almost one hundred percent. The casket is transferred to the crematorium or kasoujou in an ornate hearse and is thence unloaded and placed on a sliding tray connected to an oven. At this juncture the key to the crematorium portal in use is given to a member of the deceased's family and they are told when to return for the remains. The family returns home or to the funeral parlour to eat together at this time.

When the designated time arrives, the cremated body is returned to the family and a ceremony called kotsuage, literally the lifting of the bones, takes place. Each person present uses lengthy chopsticks to remove the bones, with two members of the family grasping the same bone with their chopsticks and placing it in the urn in tandem. This is done in a specific order, feet first to skull, and special importance is accorded to the nodobotoke or Adam's apple, which is thought to resemble the form of Buddha, sat in meditation. This remainder is placed directly under a fragment of the skull.

Upon completion of the kotsuage rite, the ikotsu urn is wrapped in a white cloth and returned to the family home where it remains until it is interred or entombed on the thirty-fifth day, or even until the forty-ninth day memorial service or shijukunichi, at the family grave. The customs surrounding the date of the internment differ from region to region.

Thereafter the deceased is honoured at memorial services called hoji. It is customary for the Japanese to visit their ancestors' graves during the obon period, in mid-July or mid-August, on the anniversary of their death and during the vernal and autumnal equinoctial weeks, a period of time referred to as ohigan. A small altar or butsudan in the home is stocked with offerings on behalf of the deceased on a daily basis or on special occasions according to individual practice. Whether the deceased is viewed as having left this world for life in the Pure Land as a pupil of Buddha, whereby the family pray for them to attain Buddha hood, or as in the Shinto tradition, they are worshipped as a guardian or family deity, the rituals that subsequently tie the deceased to the living are an integral part of Japanese society.[2] [2] To end this presentation of funeral rites in Japan, I want to register Bokusai's haiku about death, which I found during research for this article:

> Jisei nado
> zansetsu ni ka mo
> Nakarikeri.
>
> A parting word?
> The melting snow
> is odourless.

This poem, which combines the simplicity and the strength of the best haikus, helped me understand what I felt, the emptiness, the feeling of incompleteness, after the funeral of my friend Maya Ono. Some pains cannot be

easily expressed, the same way it is impossible to describe the perfume of melting snow.

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[1] In an interesting historical sidebar, research has shown that in the case of Japan's burakumin, or 'untouchables' these posthumous names were on occasion found to discriminate against the deceased. Writing on buraku discrimination and Buddhism, an edition of the Buraku Liberation News, a bimonthly publication of the Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute, stated that as recently as the 1940s: "The names include the characters for beast, humble, ignoble, servant and many other kinds of derogatory expressions".

[2] The author wishes to thank Noriko Abe for her help in researching this article.