

# **Psychology of Death; A Buddhist Perspective on Death, Preparation for Death and Grief Management**

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## **Abstract**

This study, with the intention of identifying the Buddhist psychology with regard to death, is based on Sutta Pitaka of Thripitaka (Three Volumes) in Thēravāda Buddhism. Death which is an entity, common to all living beings, has been broadly discussed in Buddhism in order to address the questions that commonly arise. Death is inevitably attached to a person with his/her birth, and Buddhism describes several causes as well as ways the death can occur, followed by discourse as to how a person should prepare for his/her death, emphasizing how a person gets a good death or a bad death. Similarly, the Buddhist discourse discusses how one can reduce the grief caused by death; understanding the transience of human life and attributing merits to the deceased are a few of many ways the Buddhist discourse emphasizes. Accordingly, the study has many implications into psychological interventions for death and dying-related issues.

**Key Words:** Actions, Death, Good Death, Grief, Mindfulness, Rebirth,

## **1. Introduction**

Buddhism resolves questions and matters relating to death. According to Buddhism, re-birth or reincarnation generates grief which can be terminated by attaining Nibbāna, which is the ultimate blissful state a person can achieve. Life,

of which death constitutes an integral part, is not a permanent phenomenon; every birth is subject to change and, ultimately, to death, which is common to all living beings. This emphasizes the need to understand the transience of life. Buddhism stresses on the fact that death is not the end of life, but merely a moment a person's life form transforms from one point to another point of Bhava, i.e. the circle of life. Following the death, a person may either appear in a plane of celestial beings or a plane of human existence or a plane of immense suffering (niraya) or a plane of animals (tiracchāna yōni)& or a plane of hungry ghosts (peta lōka)& or a plane of demons and titans (asura lōka) or reborn. The Buddhists believe that the existence of life in none of these realms are permanent and stresses the uncertainty or the transience of life.

According to Buddhism, life comes to a permanent end with achievement of the ultimate bliss of Nibbāna, which is a state that can be achieved by relinquishing greed (lōbha), hatred (dōsa) and delusion (mōha). Nibbāna is devoid of all attachments and disputes, which is the permanent salvation from sorrows. Nibbāna is a state a person perceives, after efforts and determination for many lives in the life cycle, and it helps end the cycle of birth and rebirth. Following the Eightfold Path, the person has to observe purity for that.

Death causes fear because people can predict death and due to the fear that death would cease existence. However, Buddhism preaches that death is not an incident a person faces at the end of his life or a certain point in his/her life but a whole process that begins at the very birth. Comprehending this process reduces the pain as well as the fear of death. When others die, reminding the impermanence of life to us can cause fear.

Everything in the world changes and this change causes sorrow; nothing can escape this truth. If something is

impermanent, it causes sorrow, which leads to non-self. Hence, one cannot create bonds with and get attached to things claiming it to be theirs since being attached and bound can cause sorrow. It is nature that everything changes and gradually diminishes. Getting attached to such things makes the person ultimately disappointed. Life is uncertain, death is certain and the time of death is indefinite.

Death is a part of human life and the Buddhists believe that all living beings die and that death is inevitably linked with birth. Regardless of age – children or adults -, level of education – educated or uneducated –, location – whether in the sky, sea, on a rock or inside a cave –, nobody is capable of not being subject to death (**KhN, p.182**). There is no place in the universe that a person can retreat to avoid death (Dhp, 128), (**Moragolle, 2018, p.267**); death can take place inside the womb or at any age once a person is born.

## 2. Methodology

This study, of which the intention is to identify the Buddhist psychology on death, utilizes a qualitative research approach in order to collect data and information for the study's objectives; document searching was the main method utilized. Therefore, the primary source of reference in this study is Sutta Pitaka of Thēravāda Thripitaka, published by Buddha Jayanthi Thripitaka Series by Dharma Chakra Child Foundation in 2006. Extracted data has been qualitatively analyzed under different themes.

## 3. Objectives

This study that aims at analyzing the Buddhist psychology on death intends to achieve the following objectives. Accordingly the current study was carried out with the intention of,

1. To identify the characteristics of the Buddhist definition of death
2. To identify the ways in which death occurs and causes of death
3. To understand how Buddhism prepares people for death
4. To understand the Buddhist recommendations to reduce the death-related grief.

#### 4. Defining death

Although death is biological, it has a social, cultural, historical, religious, legal and ethical perspective that is closely linked and overlapping. Many years ago, defining death was simple, but at present, due to different perspectives developed in the world, death is perceived and defined in different perspectives; the Buddhism also pays a special attention to death. Law of actions (kamma), dependent origination (paticchasamuppāda), five aggregates (pancupādānakkhandha), psycho-physical complex (nāmarupa), impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha) and non-self (anatta) are some concepts that can be used to understand death related facts. It is important to consider Buddhist definitions of death is a particular living being leaving the particular group of living beings, losing life and aggregates, disappearance or conventional death is considered “death” in Buddhism; this definition encompasses the stages from the destruction of the physical body and the soul leaving the particular life (MN, III, p.514).

Another definition says that death is physic life/life faculty, heat, and consciousness leaving the particular human being. As long as he lives, organs and biological systems function. However, after death, the physical body decays as the consciousness that combined physical body, organs and systems, is no longer present; similar to abandoning a well-maintained house.

Death is the last characteristic of “Formations” or *sanskāra*, which are made on reasons. In the Formations, origin (*uppādha*), survival (*thithi*) and destruction (*bhanga*) or death describe the life cycle. Death judges the person based on good or bad deeds he/she committed, i.e. the *karma*. Buddhists believe that King Yama (the king of the hells) examines the person’s deeds. They believe that birth in the human realm is an opportunity to prepare themselves for death.

Salla Sutta of *Kuddaka Nikāya* explains that death is inevitable; person comes to the human world uninvited, leaves it unknowingly. Just as the fear that a ripe fruit will fall on earth, the living beings live in fear as to when they will die. Just as same as a clay pot comes to an end when it breaks, life comes to an end with death (**KhN, p.182,184**). Moreover, in his preach to King Kosala, in *Jarā Marana Sutta*, Lord Buddha has mentioned how the human being cannot avoid getting old (*jarā*) and death (*marana*); even the body of an *Arahath Thero* (enlightened) decays and gets destroyed (**SN, I, p,134**).

*Rādha Thero* questioned Lord Buddha as to what represents *Māra* (the lord of death), to which he answered that where there is materiality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness, death would occur and, therefore, that materiality, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness are death (**SN, III, p.340**). Moreover, it is shown that materiality is death, the feeling is death, perception is death, mental formation is death and consciousness is death (**SN, III, p.352**). In the discussion with Venerable *Rādha*, Lord Buddha states that materiality is *Māra*, the feeling is *Māra*, perception is *Māra*, mental formation is *Māra* and consciousness is *Māra* (**SN, III, p.352**). Therefore, Lord Buddha preaches that the person should not maintain attachments to all these entities.

Dēwaduta Sutta of Anguttara Nikaya states that death is one of the five divine messages and one of the five divine persons born in human world; i.e. infant, old person, sick person, person who is punished for his wrong deeds and dead person (AN, II, Pp.386,388,390). Once someone dies, a person is to contemplate on his/her own death; that fact that he or she also dies and that he or she is not free from death. The Sutta states that therefore, a person should engage in good deeds in terms of both physical and mental conduct, in his preparation for death.

Although death is an instance or an event, Buddhism discusses about a Māra (lord of death), who is described as a god with three daughters Tanhā, Ratī and Ragā (SN, I, p.226). Similarly, Māra also has an army which, according to Buddhism, can be defeated through Saptabojjanga (seven factors) (SN, V, p.196). Māratajjanee Sutta states that once Māra entered the belly of Moggallāna thero, after realizing which he came out of Moggallāna Thero's mouth after being commanded to do so. Once Māra was out of his body, Moggallāna thero had recognized him (MN, I, p.776). In this instance, Moggallāna thero has mentioned how he himself was once born as a Māra named Dusī and that he had a sister named Kāli, realizing that it was her son that was in front of him as Māra in front of him (MN, I, p.776).

When Lord Buddha was in Isipatanārāmaya of Benaras, Māra who visited Lord Buddha had said since Lord Buddha is bound by afflictions, he is not free from Māra, to which Lord Buddha answered that he is devoid of afflictions and therefore not bound to Māra. No sooner did Māra understand that Lord Buddha recognized him than he disappeared (SN, I, p.192). In a similar incident, when Lord Buddha was in the village of Sēnāni in Uruwēla Area, Māra, meeting Lord Buddha, has said that since Lord Buddha is bound by all earthly and divine afflictions, he is

not devoid of bonds. Once Lord Buddha answered, recognizing Māra, that he is enlightened by avoiding the afflictions. At this instance too, understanding that Lord Buddha recognized Māra, he has disappeared (SN, I, p.194). These instances prove that death is not only an incident or a process but there is a being that takes people's lives.

## 5. Types of death

Although every living being succumbs to death, Buddhism teaches that it does not happen the same way. Buddhism discusses of three types of deaths, and any death of a living being happens as a result of one such reason

1. Kanika Marana (sudden death) – the death that can occur at any instance in a person's life
2. Sammuti Marana (conventional death) – the death that happens at the end of a person's life.
3. Samucchēda Marana (death with no rebirth) – death with no chance of rebirth; Lord Buddha, and Maharahath theros (Arahants) face this type of death/demise.

## 6. Causes of death

Buddhism teaches that everything happens with causes. Accordingly several causes of death have been described in Buddhism, which discusses the reasons as well as how death occurs.

1. Death due to cessation of karmic forces (Ayukkhaya Marana)

This is when the karmic forces are ceased, causing death. The karma (actions) that has the power of birth is

Janaka Karma (reproductive actions), weakening which leads to death; similar to a lamp being extinguished due to the wick being burnt out.

2. Death by the expiry of lifespan (Kammakkhaya)

This is when karmic forces remain as they are but a person dies due to the expiry of lifespan; similar to a lamp being extinguished with the wick remaining but without the oil.

3. Death due to both the above reasons (Ubhayakkhaya Marana)

Death can be caused as a result of both the above reasons; similar to a lamp running out of both oil and the wick

4. Unexpected death (Upacchēdaka marana)

This is when, even though lifespan and karmic forces are uninterrupted, death occurs as a result of a powerful Karma; unnatural and unexpected reasons that leads to death. This is similar to the flame of a lamp being extinguished due to the wind, although the wick or oil still remains in the lamp.

Out of these four causes of death, the first three are identified to be ‘timely death’ (kāla marana) and, the other one, i.e. upacchēdaka marana, is ‘untimely death’ (akāla marana). The four deaths mentioned above, i.e. death due to cessation of karmic forces (Ayukkhaya Marana), death by the expiry of lifespan (Kammakkhaya), death due to both the above reasons (Ubhayakkhaya Marana), unexpected death (Upacchēdaka marana), can also be considered as varieties of death as well

## 7. Death and Karma

Buddhist perspective of karma (actions) is another important aspect that should be studied parallel to the concept of death. Buddhism states that it is karma that causes birth, and therefore, as far as the death is concerned, the Karma or the actions must be pure. Buddhism preaches how a person commits actions via mind, body and word, emphasizing the fact that thought equals action. Good actions done with a correct, pure and good mind is meritorious, which will make him well prepared for death. A person must refrain from sinful or wrong actions. A day spent well will give the person a good sleep as well as a good death. It is important that ethical and spiritual aspects of life are developed and enhanced in order to make life a spiritually rich one.

Most of the matters related to rebirth/reincarnation can also be answered in relation to Karma, as Buddhism teaches that all living beings are born depending on their karma and that karma is what they inherit in their life. At the moment of death, kamma nimitta or the symbol of action is the reflection of the deeds of the deceased, and gati nimitta or sign of destination is the signs about the next birth. The consciousness at the moment of death or cuti citta is caused by weighty actions or garuka karma. The regular deeds of a person also affect the karmic forces and, eventually, affect the death consciousness. The usual and habitual deeds are known in Buddhism as ācinna karma.

## 8. Analysis of Psycho-physical complex

Discourse on body-mind form dictates that the ‘self’ does not exist, but we attribute self to living beings which is a convention. An assemblage of masses is what is known as the living being; this is the same to the human being, who is an amalgamation of five names and forms, i.e. form (rūpa), sensation

(vēdanā), perceptions (sannā), mental formation (sankhāra), consciousness (vinnāna). Hence, there is no person who is dying, except for a process, just like walking; the whole life itself is a process. The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (Paticca Samuppāda) describes how ignorance (avidyā) causes formations (Sankāra), and they cause consciousness (vigngnāna), and it result in body-mind (nāmarūpa), and it contributed to the sixfold base (salāyatana), which generates the contact (passa), which thereby causes feeling (vēdanā), leading to craving (tanhā), which contributes to (upādāna), leading to clinging (upādāna), causing becoming (bhava), which contributes to birth (jāthi) which causes old age (jarā), illnesses (wyādhi) and death (maraṇa) and also sorrow and lamentation, pain grief and despair.

## 9. Rebirth

Next life or rebirth is an essential fact to be discussed since in the process of life, the step that follows death is rebirth. Buddhism says that everyone devoid of afflictions reborn and only a person who attained Nibbāna can cease rebirth. Buddhism discusses of two instances of attaining Nibbāna; Sōpadisēsa Nibbāna, which is ending all afflictions when a person is living, and Anupadisēsa Nibbāna, which is the death of enlightened ones and who ceased rebirth.

Everyone with afflictions is born based on Karmic forces. Buddhism discusses several realms beings are born; the human realm, heaven and four hells are those worlds. According to Buddhism, the one who is born the next life is neither the same person nor a new one. Ignorance as well as craving makes living beings reborn. Theravada Buddhism states that the person is born immediately after his death.

## 10. Good Death and Bad Death

Everyone expects to have a good death, which is facing death without fear and accepting it with an understanding. Buddhism describes how a person receives a good death. Sāriputta Mahā Thero emphasized how a person's sinful deeds can deprive him of a good death (Bhaddakan Maranan); being attached to work, words, sleep, being a part of a gathering, being with others and delays can give a person a bad death, and not being attached, a good death (AN, IV, Pp.24,26).

Practicing compassion, as taught in Mettānisansa Sutta can lead to a good death; one dies without confusion (AN, VI, p.644). Dhammapadaya also states that the one who engages in good deeds is happy in this life as well as the next life, while the sinner repents in this as well as next life.

## 11. Preparation for death

Death makes life meaningful. Every person is required to understand and prepare for death. This only requires being positive about the person him/herself as well as others. This is important to keep the mind calm while living and maintain that calmness in the presence of death, and it also helps understand the uncertainty of life as well as develop compassion towards all living beings.

If the death of a person is imminent, it is important that, according to their culture, the relevant clergymen/women are fetched and the person is helped in his gradual process of death; making the person understand about life, reminding the qualities of triple gems; Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha), pirith chanting and similar activities that calms his mind are important. According to Buddhism, the moment a person dies is important, as it is the most important moment in a person's life.

Buddhism teaches that death is a part of a person's life and that death is only the destruction of the physical body but not of existence. Buddhists believe that death is followed by rebirth, and until the journey of Sansāra (cycle of existence) is ceased, death is an inevitable incident every person should face in life. As a result, a person has to go through adversity and sorrow throughout their lives. Lord Buddha emphasized that a person should be prepared for his death by purifying his mind and detaching from all the bonds.

Accepting death and positively affects a person's life and it reduces the stress caused by negative feelings associated with death. Understanding and accepting the idea of death make it easy for a person to deal with all the negative aspects of death resulted from death anxiety. People experience grief as they accept certainty. One way of terminating this idea of certainty in mind is accepting the fact that life at some point in a person's life leaves the person and he will be facing death. Bonds cause stress and dissatisfaction (SN, IV, p.446). Accepting death makes a person develop a personal attitude towards death and such a person sees the uncertainty of life. However, this understanding is also uncertain and therefore can disappear in course of time. Death and stress caused by death have a complex relationship which is also dynamic. Death anxiety is the fear of losing the self which exists. When life and death linked with conditions for a stop if the life does not exist death also does not have any existence. If the death does not exist no person loves life. Death anxiety is caused as a result of the attachment to the delusion of certainty which eventually causes anxiety and adversity. As a result, it is important that the part let down in Buddhism is followed in terms of dealing with the death anxiety.

Life is subject to change and therefore it causes sadness. As death is inevitable it causes stress. A person willing to be

devoid of sorrow has to change his purpose. This enables him accept death and spend a meaningful life. Accepting death and receiving it as a part of life is a positive step (AN, VI, Pp.192,193). The Four noble truths are centered on explaining sadness. Cravings cause sadness. Similarly, the attachment to existence and nonexistence also causes death (SN, V, p.270). Lord Buddha preached that the world is empty (SN, IV, p.122). A person perceives the world to be certain because of his inability and weakness to perceive the truth of the world. Passion is attached and bound to the world because of the cravings. The man wants to change the nature of the world and maintaining it as he wishes and the difference between the expectations and reality finally causes sorrow.

Mindfulness helps a person prepare for death. If a person accepts death as a part of his life when it takes place he finds it more convenient and bearable. Similarly, the attachment to the body can result in sorrow. To receive a satisfactory and peaceful death, a person has to break this bond. Therefore these practices of death should be practiced without waiting for death. As life is uncertain and death is certain, to come old is meaningless entities that we surround ourselves with have to be left. Death disperses all these bonds and therefore practicing to detach from bonds makes a person Independent and free every time. Buddhism leads people to detach from all the bonds and attachments to free the person from the stress of death.

Practicing compassion is also a way of reducing the death anxiety. Monks used to practice meditation concentrating on the dead bodies left in the jungle; the uncertainty and the repugnance of the dead bodies were contemplated in Nawasīwathika meditation. This meditation observes and contemplated how dead bodies decay due to natural and external causes such as animals and insects, which helps a person gradually detach from the bond to the physical body.

Purifying karma is also important in the preparation for death; mind, body and word should be controlled so that they will not be used to engage in wrongful deeds. Buddhism discusses how karma should be purified, and actions should be done with good intentions. A person should engage in actions that are good for him as well as others (MN, II, p.132). Purifying karma helps maintain the consciousness at the time of death (cuti citta) and consciousness at the time of conception (patisandhi citta) virtuous. Good deeds, according to Lord Buddha, make the person happy in both this life and next life (Dhp, 18) (Moragolle, 2018, p.33). Once a person dies, it is the good or meritorious deeds that help the person in his/her next life. Once a person dies, his fate in next life is decided by the deeds he has earned in the previous life (Dhp, 219,220) (Moragolle, 2018, p.447). Therefore, when a person is preparing for death, it is important that he is rich with good karma or merits.

Lord Buddha has mentioned several factors all men and women (both clergy and laity) should observe and they are listed below (AN, V, Pp.112,114). Thāna Sutta of Anguttara Nikāya; i.e-

1. I grow old
2. I get ill
3. I die
4. I will leave all things I like
5. I am the master of my deeds, inheritor of my karma (deeds). I born depending on my karma

According to Lord Buddha, preparation for death also involves mastering the meditation of mindfulness of death (Maranānussati Bhāwana). This meditation makes the person understand the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death, which helps reduce the attachments and bonds, while maintaining and observing the mindfulness of death (Maranānussati). Thereby,

a person must understand that his death can be caused by many reasons; bite of a serpent, scorpion or a centipede, tripping the legs, disorders in bodily functions of air, heat and liquidity and many other causes (AN, IV, p.46). This helps the person realize that dying with sins will cause him adversity and therefore, he must refrain from sinful acts and engage in meritorious and good deeds all day and every day (AN, IV, p.45). Similarly, the fact that the person should not be late for good deeds was the advice of Lord Buddha (AN, IV, p.48).

If a person is with desire (avītarāga), longing (avigatachandō), love (avigatapēmō), lust (avigatapipāso), unquenchable rage (avigataparilāho), craving (avigahatanhō), he/she is afraid of death. The person who has not done any good deeds (Akathakalyānō) or meritorious deeds (akathakusalō) and has committed sinful deeds (kathapāpō), he is afraid of death. In contrast, if a person is without desire, longing, love, lust, unquenchable rage, unquenchable craving, he/she is not afraid of death. The person who has done good deeds and meritorious deeds and has not committed sinful deeds is not afraid of death (AN, II, p.388).

In addition, practicing Sīla, Samādhi and Pannā, as Lord Buddha preaches, helps a person exceed Mara and rise like the sun (KhN, III, p.386). The only way escaping death is cessation of birth, by attaining the bliss of Nibbāna through the Eight noble paths.

## 12. Grief Management

Another important aspect of death is reducing the grief of the close relatives and friends of those who died, which can be done using the Buddhist teachings on death and rebirth. Every person has experienced the fact that every person known to him/her dies in due course, and the close associations and bonds with

the deceased cause grief to the living persons, since such a death is painful. Once a person dies, he/she can be no longer lived with, and the closest ones must get used to living without him/her. Grief can be observed both before and after a person's death; before death, when the closed ones anticipate the death of the associate, and after the death, realizing that the deceased person is no longer with them. No matter how hard or long a person weeps, it cannot give life to a dead person. Death is a natural component of life that no one can escape. Every person has to face the next life. Understanding this situation makes it easy for a person to ease the grief of the death of a close person. Grief is a specific emotion and we must learn how to control it and live without the person who passed away. Kisā Gōtami's story casts light into this matter. As instructed by the Lord Buddha, she went from house to house looking for a handful of mustard from a house in which no member has died. The realization of the truth of death made her understand death. Similarly, Ubbiri, Queen of King Pasēnadi Kōsola gave birth to a child, Jeewā who later died, making her lament immensely, at times at the grave of the child which she visited daily. Knowing this incident, Lord Buddha stated that 84,000 of her daughters in previous lives, with the same name as Jeewā, have been cremated at the very place, making her – and all the followers – understand the nature of life.

Grief can also be an unbearable experience. Even those who die weep before death. Every person faces loss, which is a blessing to some and a threat to some. Grief is a result of not mastering the teachings of Buddhism (**Thich Nguyen, 1999**). Grief can destroy persons, and it can also make people more matured. Humans are swimmers in the sea of grief, and therefore it is important to know swimming in it. Grief teaches people many lessons. This idea was proven in the story of Kisā Gōtami, who grieved the death of her child and later realized that grief will not give life back to the dead child.

Buddhists follow many rites and rituals concerning death; both religious and traditional rites and rituals, which include observing five-percepts, offering of clothes in remembrance of the deceased (mataka wastra), water-pouring in remembrance of the deceased and dhamma discourse on impermanence reduce the grief of the close relatives and friends of the deceased. Chantings and discourses on the impermanence of life make people understand the meaning of death, and the merits earned by offering mataka wastra and observing virtues (sīla) can be attributed to the deceased. In water-pouring in remembrance of the deceased (pan wadīma), which will make the close relatives soothe their pain, contemplating that they helped the next life of the deceased. On the sixth day of the death, a Dhamma discourse, followed by an alms giving to maha sangha is held, which is also held on the 3-month-commemoration and one-year commemoration basis; practices followed to help the next life of the deceased, making the living close relative reduce and soothe their grief.

### 13. Conclusion

Buddhism teaches that death is a process that commences from the time of birth (conceiving) which is common to all living beings; none can escape death. Death causes grief because of the attachment and therefore, detaching from all bonds makes it easy for a person to face death. In the preparation for death, Buddhism recommends that meditation on transience (anitya), mindfulness (sati), compassion (metta) and nature-of-corpse (navasīwatika) should be mastered. The facts that death is caused by several reasons and that his rebirth will be determined by his karma is taught in Buddhism, emphasizing the need to end birth and attain the bliss of Nibbāna. Buddhism directs to the impermanent nature of the world as a way of soothing the grief caused by death. The deceased can be helped even after his

death by attributing him/her merits earned through meritorious deeds done by the living persons, which will help pacify the grief of death.

### Abbreviations

AN = Anguttara Nikāya

KhN= Khuddaka Nikāya

MN = Majjhima Nikāya

SN = Sanyukta Nikāya

Dhp = Dhammapadaya

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