

## **FUNERALS: ELEMENTS THAT MIGHT BE INCLUDED IN A FUNERAL CEREMONY**

### **THE CEREMONIAL SPACE**

The funeral takes place in a space. Consideration can be given to the impact of this space in terms of its mood, privacy, intimacy etc. Sometimes more than one space is involved in the funeral eg the room where the main funeral is conducted is separate from the site of cremation or burial. Other times the funeral takes place in one location eg the crematorium. The space may be available for as long as is wanted or for a limited time. It may be privately arranged and so a lot of thought can be put into the layout of seating, a shrine etc, or there may be little control over the layout, decoration or atmosphere of this space. Here a degree of personalisation can be helpful. A shrine can be set up if this is wanted and it may be possible to quickly alter features that don't work, perhaps with draped cloth or pictures.

### **ENTRANCE:**

At the start of the funeral the “entrances” will set the tone for the occasion.

**The entrance of the body** may take place before people are assembled or may happen once everyone is in place. If the coffin is already in place when people enter the room it will be the focal point for most people. It may be surrounded by significant objects – tokens of love or reminders of the person who has died, such as photos. Malas, Buddha rupas, candles and other religious symbols can be arranged near the coffin. The coffin may be open or closed. In some Buddhist traditions there may be customs around this. If the coffin is to be carried in, the procession carrying it needs to convey the mood of dignity, but maybe lightness or affection too. The coffin may be preceded by someone carrying a Rupa or other significant object.

**The entrance of the congregation / guests** will provide their first visual encounter with the space in which the ceremony is to take place. The presence of flowers, tributes, a shrine, the coffin or other objects, as well as the general décor of the place will all contribute to the occasion and to any message the funeral organisers wish to convey about the type of event to be expected. It is worth walking into the room as a “guest” once the space is set up to check the impact of the surroundings.

**The entrance of the celebrant or celebrants**, if this occurs after the congregation arrives, will be ceremonial. This adds dignity to the occasion. The appearance of the celebrant gives immediate impact – dress needs consideration. This may involve religious clothing, but may involve a suitable smart but unobtrusive outfit. To some extent this may be influenced by the overall style of funeral desired by the family (for example do they want people to wear black or do they want to encourage more colourful clothing). The pace of walking on entry is important both in lending dignity and in creating the right mental state for the celebrant. It should bring weight to the occasion.

There may need to be a sign, such as the ringing of a bell, that proceedings have started.

### **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

The funeral probably begins with a welcome. This can be short, or may involve longer explanations. Generally it will include:

- ◆ Greeting and thanks to people attending
- ◆ Brief mention of the person who has died and tribute to them (the main tribute will come later)
- ◆ Introduction to the ceremony. A brief explanation of what will happen and maybe to any Buddhist content that may be unfamiliar to people, together with an explanation of why it was included, can be helpful.

### **CEREMONIAL**

The central part of the funeral can be a time for creativity in which the family's wishes and those of the deceased if these are known can be included. Elements may include:

- ◆ Offerings and invocations. These are often made at the start of the ceremony and may be traditional or personalised. They may be carried out by the celebrant or by the whole congregation.
- ◆ Readings of texts, poetry, music, extracts from literature
- ◆ Collective chanting, recitation or hymn singing
- ◆ Silent meditation, possible with some guidance

- ◆ A short talk giving a religious perspective on death
- ◆ Personal rituals. eg writing cards to deceased, laying flowers, lighting candles, taking momentos
- ◆ Input from other faiths. Where a family or the deceased has connection with other faiths, elements of their traditions may be included.

It can be good to include as many people as possible doing readings etc. Ceremony can also involve the congregation in active ways.

### **PERSONAL SHARING AND TRIBUTES**

Part of the funeral generally involves making tributes to the deceased. This can include

- ◆ The funeral oration – a longer commentary on the deceased person's life and achievements given either by the celebrant or a close relative or friend of the deceased.
- ◆ A series of shorter sharings from different people prepared in advanced
- ◆ Spontaneous sharing

It is usually appreciated if this sharing gives a picture of the person that is alive and will evoke memories. Amusing and quirky stories can be helpful. It does not usually work to over-glamorise the deceased or paint them as too saintly or brilliant to be believable. People want to remember the real person.

### **SENDING FORTH THE DECEASED**

Towards the end of the funeral there needs to be some element of letting go or sending the deceased person on. This may accompany the actual cremation or burial. The words here may be traditional. They may refer to a particular metaphysic specifically, to the Pureland, pure abodes, bardos, rebirth or whatever tradition the deceased adhered to or they may allude more generally to a good rebirth or simply to going forth in peace.

### **MESSAGE OF CONTINUING LIFE**

At the end of the funeral it is common also to include an element that sends the congregation forth into life. This may be expressed in images such as those drawn from the natural world – leaves growing again in spring, the continuing cycles of night and day and so on. They may be more specifically religious, referring to a text such as the Buddha's message to his disciples at his parinirvana. Alternatively it may be implied by something such as a poetry reading or piece of music that brings closure

### **DEDICATION AND ENDING**

A final dedication of the funeral ceremony itself may follow. It can be good to choose a particularly dramatic or powerful reading at this point. The last item needs to offer closure. It may also leave departing mourners with a feeling of a greater power. Alternatively an item that conveys peace and calm may also be appropriate and will also give closure.

As with the entrance, the ending of the funeral is with a series of departures. The coffin is either carried out or cremated. The celebrant leaves with due ceremony and the congregation also depart. There may be some ritual element such as offering incense, chanting mantras, leaving token offerings etc.