

as popular Chan adages, are “Mind is Buddha” and “Ordinary mind is the Way.”

### Bibliography

Cheng-chien Bhikshu, trans. *Sun-Face Buddha: The Teachings of Ma-tsu and the Hung-chou School of Ch'an*. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1993.

MARIO POCESKI

## DEATH

As in all religions, death is an event of monumental importance for Buddhism. From one point of view death may appear as a nonissue in Buddhism because the assumption of transmigration guarantees that death is not final. Death nevertheless reminds the Buddhist that human life is the best existence from which to pursue liberation, but it is relatively short; moreover, as an unusual reward of meritorious KARMA (ACTION), human life cannot be taken for granted as one's next REBIRTH and may not come again for a long time. Death also reminds the Buddhist that repeated rebirths do not guarantee progress toward realizing NIRVĀṆA; in fact each existence in SAṂSĀRA is difficult to control and so permeated by DUḤKHA (SUFFERING) in one form or another that it is exceedingly difficult to cease producing karma and escape. Belief in transmigration thus does not remove the sense of insecurity that accompanies death, and for that reason the goal of nirvāṇa is often described as “deathless” (*amṛta*) because it eliminates all such anxieties. The journey of the prince Siddhārtha outside the palace walls in the biographies of the Buddha similarly show the centrality of death as a religious problem: It is after seeing a corpse that Siddhārtha grows morose and troubled, setting up the next and final encounter with a mendicant who not only shows him the possibility of pursuing a spiritual life, but explains his own motivation as seeking “that most blessed state in which extinction is unknown.”

Considering the complexity of the impact death has on Buddhism, it may be helpful to approach the matter in four thematic ways: (1) in doctrine, (2) in praxis, (3) in memorializing the death of the Buddha, and (4) in funerary culture.

### Doctrinal death and mythical roots

Philosophical associations with death abound in the various credos that Buddhism has produced over the

centuries. In the early tradition, the FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS define humankind's central problem as *duḥkha* and indicate how it can be overcome. But the tradition also analyzes *duḥkha* itself as fourfold: birth, aging, disease, and death. Similarly, the last of the twelve “limbs” in the PRATĪTYASAMUTPĀDA (DEPENDENT ORIGIN) formula is “aging and death,” indicating the inevitable dissolution of all sentient life. Even the “three characteristics” of all conditioned existence—ANITYA (IMPERMANENCE), *duḥkha*, and anātman (nonsubstantiality)—imply the centrality of death because the deepest resonance of this truth is not the desire for permanent sources of happiness, but a permanent source of our own existence.

Death itself is described in various ways throughout the canon. The DHAMMAPADA and *Suttanipāta* frame it poetically (“just as ripe fruit falls quickly from the tree” or “like a cow being led to slaughter”), but the later *nikāyas* and ABHIDHARMA literature are more analytical. Here death is explained as the cessation of the continuity of the five SKANDHA (AGGREGATES), the crumbling of the body, and the ending of the *āyus* (life span) or *jīvitendriya* (faculty of living). Generally the *jīvitendriya* is the force that sustains human life through the continuous changes to the five aggregates, and is held to be of predetermined length. This is death in “due time,” and it is contrasted with “untimely” death caused by encountering unexpected circumstances, such as being murdered, being eaten by a wild animal, succumbing to illness, and so on. In the THERAVĀDA commentarial tradition, final moments of consciousness are described in some detail, when past karmic deeds or signs of such “settle” on the individual, and then a vision of one's future destiny occurs, such as the appearance of fire signifying hell, a mother's womb indicating rebirth in the human realm, or pleasure groves and divine palaces for a future in a heavenly realm. Then comes a momentary “death awareness” (*cuticitta*) followed immediately by “rebirth linking consciousness” (*paṭisandhiviññāṇa*) signifying the next life. The relationship between these two is said to be one of neither identity nor otherness; likened to an echo it is caused by previous events but not identical to them.

As the skandhas are formed from a collectivity of causes and conditions that are temporary in nature, the skandhas themselves are impermanent, constantly arising and ceasing. Death from the point of view of this “momentariness” doctrine is in fact something that recurs moment after moment. In this and the “end of a lifetime” notions of death, how the karmic

