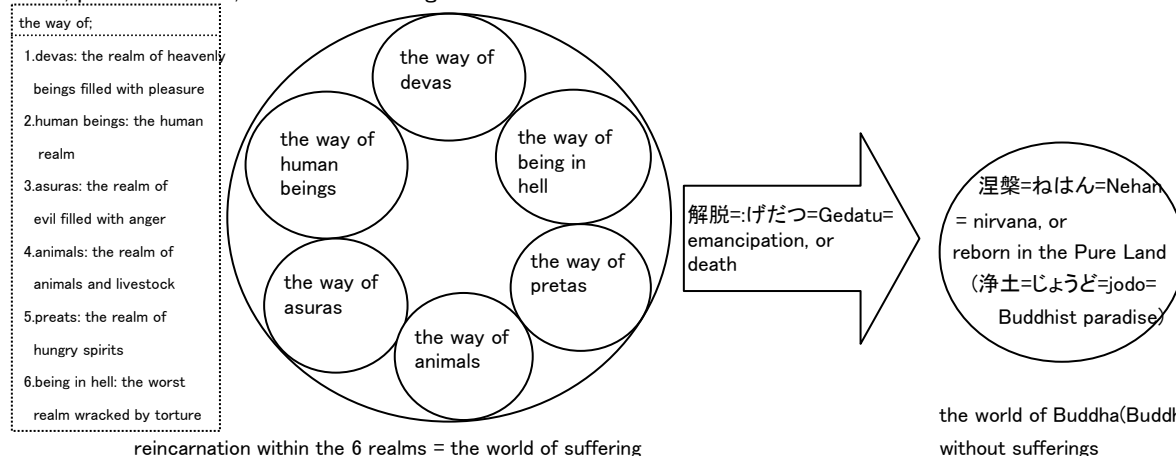


The Buddhist memorial services on the 49th day and 100 days after death

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Buddhism starts from an awareness of suffering; all sentient beings are reborn consecutively within the 6 paths. We go round the 6 realms of existence pulled by the core of suffering; to escape that, we must gain emancipation from the 6 realms of transmigration. To do this, one must either accumulate practices and enter nirvana, or be reborn in the Pure Land, practice there, and achieve enlightenment.



And further, when passing away, one is not reborn into the 6 realms at the exact moment of death. There is a certain process which requires 49 days. The period of 49 days passed in a nether-world, neither the present world nor the next, is called 中陰(chuin) or 中有(chuu). When one dies, one enters this intermediate state and travels through this shadowy realm. This is called "traveling to the world of dead." Every 7 days one comes before one of 7 judges and receives a judgment. One's acts while alive are investigated, and where in the 6 realms one will next be reborn is considered. Therefore the bereaved hold a ceremony on each of the judgment days, lending support in this world so that the dead person might receive favor in the judgments. This is called 回向(eko), the transfer of merit. The 1st judgment is on the 7th day, and this continues every 7 days until the 49th. The 49 day is the day of final verdict, when the world one will be reborn into is decided. The 49th day is called 満中陰(manchuin) and a special ceremony is held on this day. When this custom was transmitted from India to China, 3 days were added: 100 days, 1 year and 3 years. And when Buddhism reached Japan, ceremonies were added for the 7th, 13th, and 33rd anniversaries and there were then 13 ceremonies, and that has continued to the present day. These may be seen as opportunities for a retrial.



My late wife's Buddhist memorial service on the 49-day-anniversary of her death

However, in the major Japanese Buddhist schools such as jodo shu or jodo-sin shu, the dead spirits go to the Pure Land at the exact moment of death. So the descendants must not need to conduct any memorial services. However, why do most Japanese actually conduct such memorial services without a doubt? It's because such folkways derive from the traditional deep-rooted Japanese people's view of dead souls, clearly reflected in Shinto. In shinto, the spirit of the dead soon after his/her death is called 死霊(shirei=lemures=larvae) which has its character and 穢れ(kegare=something unclean(impurity)). The descendants' religious services to the spirit gradually led to the lack of its character and purification of its impurity, and after a long time the spirit is to be 祖霊(sorei=the spirit of ancestors). And sorei is to be 氏神(ujigami=guardian god of the family) by the descendant's continuous religious services. It will take 33-50 years until the "shirei" becomes "sorei", which offers the theoretical background of Buddhism's 33-year-anniversary of one's death.

If the descendants were to neglect their duty to enshrine the soul of the deceased, the soul would haunt the descendants. Therefore enshrining the soul of the dead is thought to be descendants' duty. Such feelings of Japanese people are much stronger than their feelings for Buddhism theory.

Well, from the bereaved families' feelings viewpoint, the 49-day-anniversary of the dead is called 大練忌(だいにんき=dairinki). It means the bereaved has practiced to bear up the agony of the loss after a manner for the period of 49 days, which, however, actually means the agony will grow more, according to my experience.

While, the 100-day-anniversary of the dead is called 百朝忌(ひやくちょうき=hyakuchoki=100-morning anniversary of death): it means that for bereaved families, it's bitter to wake up every morning because one can't help but realize that a loved one no longer exists. One is forced to accept the bitter reality every morning, that is, one gradually faces the loss bearing the agony. Therefore this anniversary is also called 卒哭忌(そつこくき=sokkokuki=graduation anniversary of death for a flood of tears term), meaning one graduates the term of a flood of tears. Today, June 26, 2010, is the day of the 100-day-anniversary of my late wife: and my experience tells me that the sadness settles at the bottom of my heart and the sadness changes to deep griefs without tears.

The bereaved families, thus, continue to put up with the agony.