

## Thai Christians and Buddhist Funerals: A Biblical Response

Amy Baldwin

“If I become a Christian, can I still go to funerals?” This is one of the most common questions Thais ask when they first consider becoming a Christ-follower. Questions about engaging in Buddhist Funerary rituals and to what extent a Christian can engage in them are natural for Thais who have been Buddhist their entire lives. Early missionaries to Thailand taught that Christians should not go to Buddhist funerals at all. This resulted in many Thai pastors advising congregants not to attend Buddhist funerals and blaming missionaries for this instruction. The subsequent relational repercussions created a hindrance to the spread of the gospel. When Christians fail to attend funerals, relational disconnect between believers, their families, and the larger community occurs as funerals are arguably the most important ritual in the life of a Buddhist.

In more modern times, some pastors and missionaries have advised that Christians can go to funerals, but not *wai*<sup>1</sup> during the chanting, *wai* the deceased, or light incense for the deceased. Such a prescription can be a good beginning of the discussion, but missionaries must seek to understand the deeper worldview issues at stake. Understanding why attending funerals is so central to Thai cultural life, what purpose funerals fulfill, and how funerals help the dead and the living move forward will impact missionaries’ effectiveness in discipling Thais. It will also influence their contextualization of the Christian faith for Buddhist background believers. Answering these questions requires understanding the Thai Buddhist perspective on death and the succession of the soul to the next rebirth. This article seeks to help new missionaries understand and offer a biblical response to issues behind some Thai funeral rites in light of the Thai perspective of death and the succession to the next rebirth.

---

<sup>1</sup>The *wai* involves a slight bow or dipping of the head towards hands which are pressed together close to the chest and with the fingers pointing upward in a prayer-like gesture. A *wai* is a gesture of respect used both in greetings and in worship and prayers. The deeper the bow and the higher the hands are raised, the deeper the respect shown.

A survey of the literature concerning Buddhist funerary rites will be used to flesh out the Thai Buddhist understanding of death, and the progression of the soul to the afterlife. Focus will also be given to the animistic worldview revealed in funerary practices to assist new missionaries in understanding Thai Buddhist funerary rites and rituals. Thai pastors and experienced missionaries with Thai language fluency can seek out Thai resources that provide a more in-depth study of these topics. Additionally, an in-depth analysis of the history of Buddhism, ancestor veneration, funeral chanting, and symbolism in funerals, as well as an in-depth theological discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay.

### **The Purpose of Funerals**

The sting of death is perhaps most found in its uncertainty. The question of what happens to one's loved ones upon death is millennia old and has been addressed in various ways by all religions. Funerals, though unique to each culture, provide, as Paul G. Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou say, "meaning to life by recognizing the challenge of death and ritualizing people's response to it."<sup>2</sup> Funerals offer rituals to separate the living from the dead, offer the living an opportunity to grieve their loss, reorder social relationships, and "transform the dead into ancestors."<sup>3</sup> As such, funerals are a crucial time to process the loss, move forward, and most importantly, usher into the realm of the ancestors the one they have lost.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, funerals seek to provide a means of making sense of what has always been one of life's greatest questions: What is the core essence of a person and what happens to that essence after death?

### **Background on Thai Buddhism**

Thailand has embraced Buddhism for many centuries<sup>5</sup> to a degree that makes it, "almost impossible to distinguish between Thai culture and Buddhism."<sup>6</sup> At least 90 percent of Thailand claims Buddhism as their religion, though a Thai's level of adherence and involvement in

---

<sup>2</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 102.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Charles F. Keyes, "Ritual Process and Buddhist Meanings in Northern Thailand," *Folk* 29 (1987): 182.

<sup>5</sup>Seree Lorgunpai, "World Lover, World Leaver: The Book Of Ecclesiastes and Thai Buddhism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1995) 166.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 169.

Buddhism may be minimal.<sup>7</sup> A typical Thai, however, would understand what comprises the essence of a person and what happens at death through a Buddhist worldview.

Despite this, most Thais would not be able to clearly articulate their beliefs concerning the afterlife, but would focus on the actions surrounding death and dying. This is because Thais tend to focus on action and find defining their beliefs in general difficult.<sup>8</sup> Typical Thai Buddhists will not seek to acquire book knowledge concerning their faith, as most Thais are not as concerned with right belief as they are with right practice. In terms of general religious practices, merit-making through activities such as offering food to monks in the early morning, giving money to temples, building new temples, and giving practical necessities such as robes to monks are important to Thais.<sup>9</sup> Many religious practices point devotees back to the temporal nature of all things. Even the simple Buddhist ritual of offering flowers to the Buddha “aims to remind [devotees] of the fact that [beautiful] flowers will wither, just like the fact that everything will fade out and everything will vanish.”<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note that while Buddhist, Thailand’s religious practices have deep roots in Brahmanism, animism, and polytheism.<sup>11</sup> Justin Thomas McDaniel notes, “Ghosts, various deities, magicians, astrologers, healers, amulet dealers, fortune-tellers are normative in Thai ‘Theravada’ Buddhism.”<sup>12</sup> As such, seeking to separate authentic Buddhist beliefs and practices from animistic beliefs and practices can be challenging and cause the larger picture to be missed.<sup>13</sup> The focus of this article will now turn to developing an understanding of the Thai Buddhist perspective on the soul and death.

### The Thai Understanding of Death

It has been said that death is central to Buddhist culture and has, according to Patrice Ladwig and Paul Williams, “played a crucial

---

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 165.

<sup>8</sup>Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>9</sup>R. A Hackley, “The Work of Culture in Thai Theravāda Buddhist Death Rituals,” in *Consumer Culture Theory in Asia: History and Current Issues*, eds. Russell Belk and Yuko Minowa (London: Routledge, 2021), 5.

<sup>10</sup>Fung Kei Cheng, “Buddhist Insights into Life and Death: Overcoming Death Anxiety,” *Athens Journal of Social Sciences* 4, Issue 1 (Jan. 2023): 72.

<sup>11</sup>Lorgunpai, “World Lover,” 182.

<sup>12</sup>McDaniel, *Lovelorn Ghost*, 8.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 8.

role in its development and spread.”<sup>14</sup> Ladwig and Williams credit this to the fact that exposure to death was a key inspirational aspect of the enlightenment that resulted in the development of the Buddhist religion.<sup>15</sup> It is widely known that Siddhartha Gautama, who became the historical Buddha, was exposed to the sight of a dead man as one of four things (old age, sickness, pain, and death) which led him to embark on a spiritual quest. The realization that one day he too would die led him to reject all pleasures in life, renounce his life of luxury, and search out the end of suffering. After years in the forest as a homeless ascetic, he came to the realization that suffering stemmed from desire and he could overcome desire through the eightfold path.<sup>16</sup> Thus, from the beginning, the Buddhist path began from the place of looking at death and facing the reality that all will die. It is through accepting this, according to the Buddhist worldview, that death can be overcome.<sup>17</sup>

To a Buddhist, death is inevitable and fearful. George Bond writes, “Buddhism has viewed death as the fearful and disastrous culmination of an existence already marred by sorrow and suffering, and this tragedy, death, is magnified by the surety of rebirth and the repetition of suffering and death.”<sup>18</sup> Death is not only the central problem in the Buddhist worldview, it is also a central part of the solution. In attaining nirvana through death, the Buddha defeated Mara “the king of death” and “attained deathlessness.”<sup>19</sup> The very roots of Buddhism place a large focus on death as both the problem and as a part of the solution for humanity and the emphasis on death is carried on throughout various aspects of Buddhism.

In Buddhist thought, a person is comprised of materiality or form, feeling, perception, spirit, and consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Death is defined in Buddhism as impacting the material or form. It is the “laying down of the body”<sup>21</sup> or “the cutting off of the life faculty (*jivitindriya*) spanning a single lifetime, that is, one rebirth.”<sup>22</sup> Fung Kei Cheng says, for Buddhists, it is an “unceasing cycle of living and dying, implying that

---

<sup>14</sup>Patrice Ladwig and Paul Williams, “Introduction: Buddhist Funeral Cultures,” in *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, ed. Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>George D. Bond, “Theravada Buddhism’s Meditations On Death And The Symbolism Of Initiatory Death,” *History of Religions* 19, Issue 3 (Feb. 1980): 241.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Keyes, “Ritual Process and Buddhist Meanings,” 188-189.

<sup>21</sup>Bond, “Theravada Buddhism’s Meditations on Death,” 239.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 240.

individuals experience death innumerable times, either in the past or in the future.”<sup>23</sup>

### The Remaining Essence and the Wheel of Life

The *winyan*, understood as the ‘consciousness’ or ‘spirit,’ is generally accepted as following the cycle of rebirth, or *samsara*.<sup>24</sup> The *winyan* can experience reincarnation into any one of six realms in the *samsara* cycle in accordance with their past deeds (*karma*). Rungpaka Amy Hackley explains, “These six realms . . . serve as a hierarchy of desirable states of existence. The lowest realm is the hell realm, followed by the hungry ghost (*preta* or *pret*) realm, animals, humans, gods/ antigods, and finally, enlightened beings.”<sup>25</sup>

The goal is to escape the endless *samsara* cycle of life, death, and rebirth, by reaching *nibbana* (in Sanskrit, *nirvana*), defined as “being free from all sorrow, birth, old age and death.”<sup>26</sup> The one who has reached this state “has gone beyond this cycle of life, birth, and rebirth, leaving materialism, desire, and possessiveness behind.”<sup>27</sup> Reaching *nibbana* may take hundreds or even thousands of lifetimes and most Thais “believe that only the highest monks have a chance at enlightenment in their present lifetimes.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, most Thais hope that with each subsequent reincarnation, their *winyan* would pass into a higher realm of existence and be reborn in heaven or be reborn with such a status in life that they could be in a position in life to attain *nibbana*.<sup>29</sup> This is much better to be desired than the opposite: hell.

The Buddhist hell is a fearful place, depicted in grotesque detail in various hell temples throughout Thailand. These temples contain graphic sculptures of the torments that will be afflicted to work off the various

---

<sup>23</sup>Cheng, “Buddhist Insights into Life and Death,” 68.

<sup>24</sup>François Robinne, “Theatre of Death and Rebirth: Monks’ Funerals in Burma,” in *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, eds. Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 180-181.

<sup>25</sup>Hackley, “Work of Culture,” 7.

<sup>26</sup>Hackley, “Work of Culture,” 8.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Mark Durene, *Change the Map: Impacting the Buddhist World through Prayer and Action* (Self-Published, Amazon, 2021), 66-67.

<sup>29</sup>Durene, *Change the Map*, 118. Interestingly enough, until *nibbana* is attained, no rebirth for the Buddhist, be it in hell, as a hungry ghost, or as a *thewada* in heaven, is permanent. Heaven can be fallen from and hell is a sort of purgatory in which one is punished for the misdeeds of previous lives. See Keyes, “Ritual Process and Buddhist Meanings,” 195.

misdeeds committed in previous lives. Thais will bring their children to hell temples to instill in them the fear of ever entering that existence.

Ghosts or *phī* are another form of undesirable rebirth in the Thai worldview. *Phī* are connected to bad deeds in life; unresolved conflicts; traumatic, premature or otherwise bad deaths; or improper funeral rites.<sup>30</sup> At the time of death, the corpse is no longer considered to be a person, but is now considered to have become “the source of a potentially dangerous spirit (*phī*) which will trouble the living until the remains are properly disposed of.”<sup>31</sup> In its most basic sense, a *phī* is a “dangerous essence of a person that survives death and is initially associated with the corpse.”<sup>32</sup> In cases of bad death where the death was sudden or especially violent, the danger associated with a *phī* is even greater. Ladwig and Williams say such persons “are denied the passage and are caught in between the worlds.”<sup>33</sup> The surviving essence in these cases “remains a *phī* for an indefinite period.”<sup>34</sup> To safeguard the living, the body must be “sent off” (*song*), that is, separated from the social grouping in which it had been when the person was alive” through proper funeral rites.<sup>35</sup> Conducting proper death rituals and holding appropriate funerals are crucial for helping the spirit go on to their next rebirth.<sup>36</sup>

### Dying Well

Proper death rituals begin ideally prior to the death of the person, as the quality of a person’s last moments can also significantly impact the circumstances of their next rebirth. A good death in the Thai worldview occurs when a person is seen to have lived their full years and die a quiet, peaceful death, without expressing suffering, maintaining self-control until the last moment, meditating on the Buddha and taking refuge in the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the teachings of the Buddha and the religious community.<sup>37</sup> Ideally, a person should die surrounded by their loved ones and all their belongings, if at all possible, at home.

Various ceremonies can be conducted prior to a person’s death by the family or monks who are called upon to help the person experience

<sup>30</sup>Hackley, “Work of Culture,” 10; Ladwig and Williams, “Introduction,” 13.

<sup>31</sup>Keyes, “Ritual Process and Buddhist Meanings,” 185.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 186-187.

<sup>33</sup>Ladwig and Williams, “Introduction,” 13.

<sup>34</sup>Keyes, “Ritual Process and Buddhist Meanings,” 186.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*; Hackley, “Work of Culture,” 10.

<sup>37</sup>Alexandra de Mersan, “Funeral Rituals, Bad Death and the Protection of Social Space among the Arakanese (Burma),” in *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, ed. Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University

the best rebirth possible. A family, for example, might go through a forgiveness ceremony asking the dying person to forgive them of any wrongdoings, general or specific, and take many steps to make merit on behalf of the dying person.<sup>38</sup> According to tradition, the dying person should make an effort to think about the Buddhist scriptures or to say one of the names of the Buddha, such as *Phra Arahant*. If the person is too far gone, the name of the Buddha may be whispered in his ear.<sup>39</sup> Ceremonies continue after the passing of the individual with monks arriving shortly after to conduct rituals to help transfer as much merit as possible to help the deceased in their rebirth.<sup>40</sup>

It may well be said that Thai funerary rites continue the rituals that occur in ideal circumstances prior to death. The goal of the rituals is two-fold. First, to send off the remaining essence of the corpse through proper disposal of the body so that the person does not get stuck in limbo, tormenting the living as a *phī*. The second goal is to make merit for the deceased to improve the status of their next rebirth, as their fate is not certain.

Following the death of a person, the loved ones and community of the deceased gather together, led by specialists from the temple, “to ensure a safe passage for the dead from this life and into their next.”<sup>41</sup> Funeral rituals are intricate and can involve “very diverse practices such as chanting, preaching, confusing the spirit of the deceased, gambling, inviting gods, giving merit to the dead, and feeding the spirit of the deceased.”<sup>42</sup> Funerals in Thailand will last three days for a common person and may be longer for someone of high status or a monk.<sup>43</sup> The funeral, at least in Southern Thailand, typically will occur in the evening for three consecutive evenings to allow as many people as possible to gather to remember the deceased, eat together, listen to a sermon and chant, and make merit for the deceased.

Funerals in Thailand are social events, not private family affairs. Well-attended funerals provide the deceased and their family with status.

---

Press, 2012), 146.

<sup>38</sup>These details are generalized from the story of Fawng in Stonington, “The Uses of Dying,” 74-75.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>41</sup>Rebecca S. Hall, “Materiality and Death: Visual Arts and Northern Thai Funerals,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46, Issue 3. (Oct. 2015): 349. doi:10.1017/S0022463415000296.

<sup>42</sup>Rita Langer, “Chanting as ‘Bricolage Technique’: a Comparison of South and Southeast Asian Funeral Recitation,” in *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, eds. Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, 25.

<sup>43</sup>Hall, “Materiality and Death,” 350.

Tongpan Prometta says, “The dead (and their families) who have poor attendance at a funeral become the neighborhood laughingstock.”<sup>44</sup> On the morning of the fourth day, the cremation, the important culmination of all the ceremonies and rituals, will occur.<sup>45</sup>

While Buddhist funerals share many common elements, no singular authoritative text prescribes the funeral should be conducted.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, while some ritual aspects of funerals seem universal across all funerals, some dynamics are regional or otherwise not deemed significant enough to address in various literature concerning funerals in Thailand. Three common elements in Thai funerals are chanting, making merit for the dead, and actions to help guide the remaining essence to the next rebirth. These practices will be examined briefly.

### Chanting and the Use of the Abhidhamma in Funeral Rites

Monks are invited after the death to chant the *Abhidhamma* and parts of the *Phra Malai* as a part of the funeral services.<sup>47</sup> The Pali chanting is not understood by most laity and even monks, however, “the semantic meaning of the chanting matters little compared to its powerful ritual value.”<sup>48</sup> Chanting is seen as “an indispensable part of a funeral rite” in which the words “battle the potential pollution caused by death.”<sup>49</sup> During the chanting, funeral attendees will *wai*, with raised hands pressed together before their faces, and listen in a solemn manner.

The text most commonly chanted at Thai funerals is believed to powerfully create a new life for the deceased and is from the *Abhidhamma*.<sup>50</sup> The Buddha himself, it is believed, chanted the entire text of the *Abhidhamma* to his mother from the *Tāvātimsa* heaven after her death.<sup>51</sup> It is common for monks to chant sections of the book over the dead, even as the monks walk alongside the body as it is being taken

---

<sup>44</sup>Tongpan Prometta, “Allowing Jesus to be Reborn at Funerals” (writeup of Seminar given at the Isaan Congress II, Khon Kaen, Thailand, 18 October 2000), translated by Paul H. DeNeui, 2, <https://www.thaimissions.info/gsd/collect/thaimiss/index/assoc/HASH0179/20b08ded.dir/doc.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup>Hall “Materiality and Death,” 350.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>47</sup>Langer, “Chanting as ‘Bricolage Technique,’” 25.

<sup>48</sup>Justin Thomas McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves, Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 236.

<sup>49</sup>Ladwig and Williams, “Introduction,” 12.

<sup>50</sup>McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves*, 240.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 238.



for cremation.<sup>52</sup> The very syllables of the book titles which represent the major topics of the *Abhidhamma* are seen to have ritualistic power. Chanting the syllables from the *Abhidhamma* at a funeral helps guide the remaining essence of the person to a good rebirth.<sup>53</sup>

### Making Merit for the Dead

Funerals have many rituals for the purpose of making merit for the deceased in hopes that they will experience a better rebirth “or at least not be forced to wander the earth as a ghost in spiritual limbo.”<sup>54</sup> Even if the spirit had a negative rebirth, “the transfer of merit will still contribute to reducing the time that the unfortunate one must spend in that state.”<sup>55</sup> To make merit for another, one must perform deeds of merit and wish that the merit he gains be accounted to another, or to all beings. This wish, silent or vocalized, does not cause the one making merit to lose any of the benefits of the merit he made and transferred. Both the maker of merit and the receiver of merit benefit equally.<sup>56</sup> Mentions of merit transfer date back to the historic Buddha who said, “the greatest boon one could confer on one’s dead ancestors was to perform ‘acts of merit’ and transfer to them the merit so acquired.”<sup>57</sup>

Funeral rites done to make merit for the deceased include, but are not limited to, offering incense, offering food to the monks, offerings of cloth on behalf of the deceased, pouring of the water of dedication, and ordination to monkhood. Some of these practices, such as chanting and offerings of incense, may be done by anyone in attendance at the funeral. Other practices, such as the offerings of food or cloth, the pouring of

---

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves*, 240.

<sup>54</sup>Karl V. Dahlfred, “A New Hope for Understanding: Adapting the Buddhist Paradigm of Merit Transference to Explain the Substitutionary Sacrifice of Christ,” *Thai Missions Library*, April 11, 2003, <https://www.thaimissions.info/gsdll/collect/thaimiss/index/assoc/HASH4900.dir/doc.pdf>, 12-13.

<sup>55</sup>Keyes, “Ritual Process and Buddhist Meanings,” 192.

<sup>56</sup>Dahlfred, “A New Hope for Understanding,” 12-13.

<sup>57</sup>Dahlfred shares a fascinating story of how the historic Buddha endorsed or perhaps could even be said to have taught this idea of merit transfer, see Dahlfred, “A New Hope for Understanding,” 12-13.

the water of dedication or the ordination to monkhood, may only be conducted by certain individuals.

### Guiding the Remaining Essence of the Deceased

A third dynamic of Thai funeral rites is guiding the remaining essence of a person away from this life, to a better rebirth. Great care is taken to ensure that the remaining essence of a person is led away from the home or confused so it cannot find its way back to the home to haunt the family. In times past, a special three-step ladder or “the stairway of spirits” was used to remove the corpse from the house. The floor where the body had lain was washed to remove any trace of the dead from the house and make the return of the spirit more challenging.<sup>58</sup>

In the funeral rites themselves, care is taken to lead the remaining essence of the person to the best rebirth possible. A white cotton string or cord is often tied to the corpse and then attached to the image of the Buddha.<sup>59</sup> The string can also be tied to the funeral pyre as a means for the monks to guide the dead to heaven.<sup>60</sup> Money may be placed in the mouth of the corpse or in the hand.<sup>61</sup> This is in order to ensure that they have money “as the fare for the boat or raft to the land of spirits”<sup>62</sup> or to ensure that they have money in the next life.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, there is a funeral rite where monks write four syllables on a small piece of paper. These syllables represent the four main topics of *Abhidhamma*: “‘ci’ for *citta* (mind), ‘ce’ for *cetasika* (mental factors or concepts), ‘ru’ for *rupa* (material form), and ‘ni’ for *nibbana*.”<sup>64</sup> This piece of paper will then

---

<sup>58</sup>Phra Khru Anusaranasasanakiarti and Charles F. Keyes, “Funerary Rites and the Buddhist Meaning of Death: An Interpretative Text from Northern Thailand,” *Journal of the Siam Society*, 68, Issue 1 (1980): 11.

<sup>59</sup>Hall, “Materiality and Death,” 350.

<sup>60</sup>Prometta, “Allowing Jesus to be Reborn at Funerals,” 4-5; Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes “Funerary Rites,” 25; Hall “Materiality and Death,” 350-351.

<sup>61</sup>Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes “Funerary Rites,” 7; Stonington, “The Uses of Dying,” 71.

<sup>62</sup>Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes “Funerary Rites,” 20-21.

<sup>63</sup>Stonington, “The Uses of Dying,” 71. Stonington notes many Thais will recognize that they cannot take possessions with them, but the luck or merit that is connected to having money on them when they die is still appealing.

<sup>64</sup>McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves*, 240.

be placed in the mouth of the corpse to help guide the deceased to a favorable rebirth.<sup>65</sup>

### Summary of Thai Funeral Rites

Thai funerals are filled with rituals and rites that must be performed precisely to achieve their desired result. Properly sending off the remaining essence of the person so that the person does not get stuck in limbo, tormenting the living as a *phī* is a primary concern as is making merit for the deceased to improve the status of their next rebirth. All Thai funerary rites stem from Thai Buddhist beliefs concerning the way the remaining essence of a person goes on to their next rebirth and what can and should be done to assist them in this process.

### Biblical Perspective on Death and Dying

Christianity and Buddhism have little in common when it comes to the perspectives on death and dying. Both can agree that when the shell of the body which houses the eternal part of a person breathes its last, the remaining essence of the person goes on. However, the way the two faiths define what makes up the essence of a person is vastly different. As noted earlier, in the Buddhist worldview, when a person dies, they can go on to any one of six different forms of reincarnation: as beings in hell, hungry ghosts (*preta* or *pret*), animals, humans, gods/antigods, and enlightened beings.<sup>66</sup> The Bible, however, teaches that mankind is unique from other beings in that “there is a spirit in man” (Job 32:8 KJV) which comes from the breath of God. When God created mankind, he was made in the very image and likeness of God and God breathed into mankind the breath of life (Gen 1:26-28; 2:7). Furthermore, because of his being made in the image of God, mankind was given dominion over all other life on the earth (Gen 1:26-28). Mankind is also unique from angels and demons, having been made a little lower than the angels (Ps 8:4-5). Mankind does not take on another form after death. Instead, the spirit of the man “will return to God who gave it” (Eccl 12:7 NASB 2020; NLT). Rather than taking on a new form, the believer in Christ is promised that “the dead will be raised imperishable” and mortals will be clothed with immortality (1 Cor 15:52-55 NASB 2020). Furthermore, when “the earthly tent we live in is taken down . . . we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human

---

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Hackley, “Work of Culture,” 7.

hands” (2 Cor 5:1 NLT). None of these passages speak of the deceased changing realms from human to animal, ghost, or angel. Rather, these passages only speak of the eternal life that will be the inheritance of the redeemed. Christians need not fear that they or their relatives will not successfully pass from one life into the next.

The most memorized Bible verse, John 3:16, provides much hope for the believer in Jesus: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”<sup>67</sup> For the Western believer in Jesus, this verse provides reassurance of the great hope we have in Christ. For the Buddhist, however, the idea of eternal life is frightening. Buddhism does offer eternal life but it is a life of various cycles of rebirth.<sup>68</sup> The hope of Buddhism is that one might reach *nibbana* and remove all attachments, at which point, the essence of a person ceases to exist. Consequently, it is vital to describe eternal life carefully to a Buddhist. The Bible declares that “each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgement” (Heb 9:27 NLT). There is no endless cycle of rebirths; the soul lives on forever, either in eternity with Christ or eternally separated from him. Those who believe in him “have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have passed already from death into life” (John 5:24 NLT). To be absent from this life is to be present with Christ (2 Cor 5:8).

One fearful dynamic of eternal existence to Buddhists is that the Buddha understood life as synonymous with suffering. Biblically, however, suffering was never a part of God’s original design.<sup>69</sup> When God lovingly created the world, it was perfect and had no suffering. As a result of the fall of man in the garden of Eden, sin entered the world, and with it came suffering. Through one man’s trespass sin, death, and suffering entered the world (Rom 5:12-17). Christ was victorious over sin and its consequences when he rose from the dead (Matt 28:6-7). Christ’s victory over death and the grave (Rev 1:17-18) means that the very wages of sin, which is death (Rom 6:23) no longer has power over Jesus (Rom 6:9). Christ’s victory over death is also a victory over suffering. Revelation 21:4 promises, “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

The believer in Christ can also be assured that their spirit will never experience the second death of the fire of hell (Rev 20:14). The statement

---

<sup>67</sup>All Scripture quotations are NKJV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>68</sup>Durene, *Change the Map*, 67.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 76-77.

that a believer in Christ will not perish (John 3:16, 36), does not mean that their physical frame will not taste death, rather their spirit man will not experience the fires of hell. Jesus promised, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26 NLT). Death came into the world through one man, Adam, but resurrection from the dead has begun through Christ (1 Cor 15:21). Christ will put all enemies beneath his feet, even the final enemy, death. (1 Cor 15:24-25). Because of this, we can grieve, but not as ones who do not have hope (1 Thess 4:13-18). For the believer, the sting of death has been swallowed up by the victory of Christ’s saving work (1 Cor 15:53-55).

Salvation for the believer in Christ is only by faith, not by efforts or good works (John 3:16; Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). The one who believes in the Lord Jesus and confesses that God raised him from the dead is saved (Rom 10:9-10; Acts 16:30-33). Salvation is through no one other than Jesus (Acts 4:12; John 14:6) and no one will be able to snatch the believer out of His hand (John 10:28). Believers in Christ can rest assured of their salvation and the destination of their souls. Death, life, angels, demons, good death or bad death, nothing can separate the believer from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39 ESV). Their soul will not get lost along the way. It does not matter if a person’s soul is attached to things of this life. The believer’s salvation is secure. The destination of the soul is not dependent on what rituals are done for the person.

### **A Biblical Response to Thai Funeral Rites**

The confidence that the believer can have in their salvation results in funeral rites which can and should be quite different than those held for a Buddhist. For those who have been believers in Christ for quite some time and whose family is predominately believers, Christian funerals, including burials, can be conducted. A Christian funeral service’s purpose is to allow time for those who remain on earth to process the loss of the individual and to declare the glorious news that Christ has defeated death once and for all. The funeral is a celebration of the person’s life and is an opportunity for the church community to witness the hope that believers have in Christ. When enough of a person’s community are followers of Christ, a Christian service for a believer in Christ does not pose as many issues as in a community with fewer believers. Missionary Mark Durene shared his experience of a seeker coming to faith in an unreached town. The concern of the seeker about how the community would receive their funeral, devoid of Buddhist practices, nearly prevented the seeker from coming to faith. Creativity and a God-given idea allowed the individual

to discover a path that would allow them to feel comfortable having a Christian funeral service.<sup>70</sup> An in-depth examination of establishing a Christian funeral focused on meeting the needs of the Buddhist family, friends, or community falls outside the scope of this article. A study is needed that considers the need to send off the spirits of the deceased properly and fulfill the need to make merit for them.

However, the more common scenario Thai Christians face is that the deceased was Buddhist themselves or has Buddhist family members who would like a Buddhist funeral service. This leaves Thai Christian family members or friends with questions concerning their involvement. Can a Thai Christian attend a Buddhist funeral? If so, in what ceremonies can they participate? A full examination of the subject would take several volumes, but some initial critical observations can be made.

### Christian Attendance at Thai Buddhist Funerals

The initial question is if a Thai Christian can attend a Buddhist funeral. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, early missionaries prohibited Thai believers from attending Buddhist funerals. Since Thai funerals are a central part of community life, this essentially cut the believers out of the community entirely. Additionally, not attending funerals can give the sense that Christians have abandoned or forgotten their Buddhist friends and family by not being present in the remembrance of their lives.<sup>71</sup>

Christians should attend Buddhist funerals as a means of keeping community relationships strong, showing solidarity with their loved ones and community, and offering their respects to the deceased. Honoring these important values can open opportunities to share with others the hope believers have in Christ. Because of this vital, hope-based Christian perspective, believers need to understand that funerals are more about the living than the dead. Though containing rites and worldviews that are contrary to Biblical principles, Thai funerals can still help to bring closure upon death. Believers need to be aware that the Thai worldview on death and dying is contrary to biblical truths; however, the believer in Christ need not worry about the possibility of the remaining essence returning to haunt them. They should also be instructed that meritorious acts cannot be done on behalf of the deceased. Early on in discipleship, the essential biblical principles concerning what makes the essence a

---

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 107-112.

<sup>71</sup>Prometta, "Allowing Jesus to be Reborn at Funerals," 2.

person and what happens to the spirit of a person upon death should be taught, not merely at times of crisis brought about by death.

### Biblical Response to Chanting and the Use of the *Abhidhamma* in Funeral Rites

The *Abhidhamma*, as discussed earlier, is chanted during a funeral to help guide the remaining essence of the person to their rebirth and to help combat pollution caused by death. Most Thais cannot understand, let alone chant along with the *Abhidhamma* since it is in Pali, but it is expected that funeral attendees will *wai* during the chanting. But should a Christian?

The message of the *Abhidhamma* and the ritualistic power it is believed to have are directly opposed to the teaching of Scripture. Since it is believed that the *Abhidhamma* helps to guide the remaining essence of the person to their rebirth and assist in the creation of their new existence, the reason for the chanting is also in opposition to the Scripture. As outlined above, the soul of the person is not reborn. Instead, it is ordained for man to die only once before going before the judgment (Heb 9:27). Chanting does not help guide the soul to a new rebirth.

As such, when attending a funeral for a Buddhist, Christians should not *wai* during the chanting. A *wai* would indicate agreement with the chanting in opposition to the teaching of Scripture. Thais do not expect those who do not adhere to Buddhism to *wai* during the chanting. In fact, it is commonly known that Christians and Muslims do not *wai* during funerals. If funeralgoers leave prior to the chanting, engage in serving food or otherwise helping during the service, or simply sit quietly during the chanting, their decision not to *wai* would not cause a problem for the community.

In a Buddhist funeral, Christians may have no opportunity to exchange any of the rituals for another which is more fitting of their beliefs. However, such rituals do not preclude a believer from prayer. In fact, while the monks are chanting is an ideal time for funeralgoers to pray. For example, prayers committing the deceased into the hands of God are prayers the believer could offer. Additionally, funeralgoers may commit to memory or prepare in advance Scripture passages about the hope believers have in Christ to reflect upon quietly during the chanting portion of the funeral. One caveat would be that while using this time for prayer and Scripture meditation, it is best to do so quietly and without

outward shows of devotion to avoid actions that could be confused with participation in the Buddhist rites.

### Can a Believer *Wai* the Deceased?

A key issue among Thai Christians is if a believer can *wai* the corpse of the deceased? A talk given by a Thai pastor, Tongpan Prometta, addressed this issue saying, “When our father and mother were alive we *wai*-ed them didn’t we? Why can we not *wai* them after they die? You can *wai* them. You can *wai* them as your parents or relatives.”<sup>72</sup> Prometta clarifies that the believer in Jesus should not *wai* the corpse as others do but should give thanks to God for the person’s life and release them to God. If the deceased was a believer, Prometta says that to *wai* the corpse while speaking to the person saying that they are now with God and the believer will join them when God sees fit can be a way of bringing closure while honoring God and the memory of the deceased.<sup>73</sup>

### Biblical Response to Making Merit for the Dead

The idea of making merit for the dead opposes the scriptural understanding of salvation, which is by grace through faith and cannot be earned. Making merit is a means of earning a better rebirth by doing good deeds to help outweigh the bad deeds one has done. Making merit on behalf of another is a means of seeking to do those good deeds and wish the benefits upon another. Only the sacrifice of the One, Jesus, is able to justify those who believe (Rom 5:16-18). As much as one may desire to, it is impossible for someone to wish the benefits of salvation upon another. Salvation is only available as a free gift to the one who believes.

When attending a funeral for a Buddhist, Christians should not perform acts of merit on behalf of the dead, such as offering incense, offering food to the monks, offering cloth on behalf of the deceased, pouring the water of dedication, or ordination to monkhood. Of these, the one act of merit-making that may be the hardest for a Christian to decline is that of ordination as a monk, which is referred to as “ordination in front of the corpse” (*buat nā sop*).

During a funeral, a male family member, usually a son or grandson, but perhaps a nephew or younger brother, will be ordained to monkhood for a short duration, usually not exceeding three days. It is believed that

---

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.



this ordination produces significant merit on behalf of the deceased.<sup>74</sup> A son becoming ordained to monkhood for his living parents can, in the Buddhist worldview, result in enough merit to allow a woman to be reborn as a man and place her in a position to attain *nibbana*.<sup>75</sup> The family pressure on young men to fulfill their obligation to family members in this way is tremendous since, in the mind of the family, the quality of the deceased's rebirth may depend largely upon this ordination and merit transfer.<sup>76</sup> Despite this, ordination to monkhood requires the one becoming a monk to "take refuge" in the Three Jewels, saying, 'I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the *dharma* [the teachings of the Buddha]. I take refuge in the *sangha* [the monastic order].'<sup>77</sup> Taking such a vow, even for a short duration of time, directly opposes placing one's faith in Jesus Christ. If a Christian is viewed as the only person who can *buat nā sop*, Thai church leaders and missionaries must help the Christian understand that not taking that step is one of the best ways to express love to their family. They must also help the Christian to prayerfully navigate how to express to their family that their becoming a monk will not help the deceased attain a better rebirth.<sup>78</sup>

The only actions that can be done on behalf of another is when the person is living. Christians should be taught to provide for and take care of their family while they are living (1 Tim 5:8). Once they have died, they cannot send them even a drink of cool water, as is clear in the story of the rich man and Lazarus that Jesus told (Luke 16:19-31). Once a person has died, the soul goes on and we must trust Jesus to judge them rightly. Offering prayers on their behalf does not help their soul go on to a better place. Any actions done after their death help those who remain to grieve and process the loss and move forward.

Praying to entrust the soul of the deceased to the Lord is for the benefit of those who remain, but is a helpful practice. If the deceased has Christian family members or friends, it may be appropriate to gather together believers for a moment of prayer during the funeral or perhaps to take communion together to remind one another of the victory of Christ over death. Because Thai Buddhist funerals are very social events with a meal before and more eating after the chanting portion of a funeral, there are many opportunities for friends to gather together. Also, it is very common for those who do not adhere to Buddhism to choose not to sit in the main hall during the chanting portion of the funeral but to

---

<sup>74</sup>Anusaranasasanakiarti and Keyes, "Funerary Rites," 10-11.

<sup>75</sup>Durene, *Change the Map*, 118.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 120.

sit outside the main hall (which is typically a pavilion or tent) or to help with the food or cleanup. As long as the gathering does not disturb the main ceremonies of the funeral there is no reason Christians could not gather to pray or take communion. Additionally, if there are Christian family members, presenting them with a cross to represent and remind them of the victory of the cross may be a meaningful ritual.

### Guiding the Remaining Essence of the Deceased

The Bible is clear that “ghosts” are not what the Thai worldview espouses, rather evil spirits masquerading as the ancestors.<sup>79</sup> Because there is no need to fear a person becoming a ghost, there’s no need to seek to confuse the spirits, or to lead the spirit of the person on to the next rebirth. The person doesn’t need a string or scriptures in their mouth to guide them to heaven. No money can buy heaven for them.<sup>80</sup>

In the event of a Christian attending a Buddhist funeral, these actions will likely still take place. However, the Christian does not need to participate in them. A believer in Jesus can in prayer release the deceased to Jesus. If the loved one was a believer in Jesus, they can thank God that their loved one has been received by God. It may also help to speak out the person’s name declaring that they are now with God. If their loved one was not a believer or it was unclear, then prayers of gratitude that God is a just judge, though perhaps difficult to offer, are appropriate.

### Conclusion

This article set out to examine some of the Thai funeral rites in light of the Thai perspective of death and the succession to the next rebirth, offer a Biblical response to these issues, and lay a foundation to help new missionaries understand these issues. Missionaries in Thailand who carefully examine the practices surrounding death and funerals may better understand the Thai worldview and become empowered to effectively minister to new believers and answer their questions on end-of-life issues. This study may also empower missionaries to assist pastors who may be uncertain of the biblical response to these issues to search them out in Scripture. Furthermore, it may open up opportunities for missionaries to discuss with Thai pastors and leaders how to develop a biblical pattern for funerals that honors the community’s need to properly send a deceased person off while also honoring biblical principles.

---

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 105-106.

<sup>80</sup>Prometta, “Allowing Jesus to be Reborn at Funerals,” 3.

Developing such a set of properly contextualized Christian rituals that “make sense within the local cultural context” without slipping into “combining different religions, cultures or ideas” in a syncretic method may not be possible,<sup>81</sup> however, it is a venture which if bathed with prayer could help Thai believers understand the gospel themselves in a greater measure.

### Bibliography

- Anusaranasasanakiarti, Phra Khru, and Charles F. Keyes. “Funerary Rites and the Buddhist Meaning of Death: An Interpretative Text from Northern Thailand.” *Journal of the Siam Society* 68, no. 1 (1980): 1-28.
- Bond, George D. “Theravada Buddhism’s Meditations On Death And The Symbolism Of Initiatory Death.” *History of Religions* 19, Issue 3 (Feb. 1, 1980): 237-258, ProQuest.
- Cheng, Fung Kei. “Buddhist Insights into Life and Death: Overcoming Death Anxiety.” *Athens Journal of Social Sciences* 4, Issue 1 (Jan. 2023): 67-88.
- Dahlfred, Karl V. “A New Hope for Understanding: Adapting the Buddhist Paradigm of Merit Transference to Explain the Substitutionary Sacrifice of Christ.” Thai Missions Library. Published April 11, 2003, <https://www.thaimissions.info/gsdll/collect/thaimiss/index/assoc/HASH4900.dir/doc.pdf>.
- de Mersan, Alexandra. “Funeral Rituals, Bad Death and the Protection of Social Space among the Arakanese (Burma).” In *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, 142–64. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Durene, Mark. *Change the Map: Impacting the Buddhist World through Prayer and Action*. Self-Published, Amazon. 2021.
- Hackley, R. A. “The Work of Culture in Thai Theravāda Buddhist Death Rituals.” In *Consumer Culture Theory in Asia: History and Current Issues*, edited by Russell Belk and Yuko Minowa, Routledge, United Kingdom, 2021, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355124873\\_The\\_Work\\_of\\_Culture\\_in\\_Thai\\_Theravada\\_Buddhist\\_Death\\_Rituals](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355124873_The_Work_of_Culture_in_Thai_Theravada_Buddhist_Death_Rituals).
- Hall, Rebecca S. “Materiality and Death: Visual arts and Northern Thai funerals.” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46, Issue 3 (Oct. 2015): 346–367, doi:10.1017/S0022463415000296.

---

<sup>81</sup>Durene, *Change the Map*, 110.

- Hiebert, Paul G., Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou. *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999.
- Keyes, Charles F. "Ritual Process and Buddhist Meanings in Northern Thailand." *Folk* 29 (1987): 181-206.
- Ladwig, Patrice and Paul Williams. "Introduction: Buddhist Funeral Cultures." In *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, 1-20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Langer, Rita. "Chanting as 'Bricolage Technique': a Comparison of South and Southeast Asian Funeral Recitation." In *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, 21-58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Lorgunpai, Seree. "World Lover, World Leaver The Book Of Ecclesiastes and Thai Buddhism." Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 1995. ThaiMissions.info.
- McDaniel, Justin Thomas. *Gathering Leaves, Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008.
- McDaniel, Justin Thomas. *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Prometta, Tongpan. "Allowing Jesus to be Reborn at Funerals." Writeup of Seminar given at the Isaan Congress II, Khon Kaen, Thailand, October 18, 2000. Translated by Paul H. DeNeui. <https://www.thaimissions.info/gsd/collect/thaimiss/index/assoc/HASH0179/20b08ded.dir/doc.pdf>.
- Robinne, François. "Theatre of Death and Rebirth: Monks' Funerals in Burma." In *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, 165-91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Stonington, Scott. "The Uses of Dying: Ethics, Politics and the End of Life in Buddhist Thailand." Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Francisco; and University of California Berkley, 2009.