

# Ideal support for a Buddhist dying, death and funeral

The most important guiding principles when a Buddhist dies, are:

1. To disturb the remains as little as possible, and
2. To do as little harm to the environment as possible (this would include the natural, physical as well as the psycho-social environment).

Towards honouring these principles, there are many different practices that are tailored to specific contexts, cultures and physical environments. What follows here are the ideal supports for a Buddhist's dying, death and funeral within the Western Cape, South Africa. (We are only looking at death due to natural causes, as unnatural deaths require State Pathology autopsies. Also, in the case of organ donation, these ideals cannot be lived up to. In all instances, and as far as possible, the above principles will apply in so far as is practicable and reasonable.)

1. **Buddhist Dying:** final days at home, in hospital / hospice / retirement home
  1. Quiet and as little disturbance as possible (this applies to noise as well as movement(s) around the body in the room; minimal touching of the body – as per Comacare guidelines <http://www.comacare.com>)
  2. Towards this, to have a designated private room for the care of the dying person (i.e. not having to share a room with many others when one is dying, and therefore be disturbed by their attending staff and visitors).
2. **Buddhist Death:** Here there are two stages that are observed, from an outsider's perspective:
  1. **immediately following clinical death up to and including 4 hours after death**, or when the body starts to cool down
    - i. absolutely no touching of the body
    - ii. no disturbance in the room – only the prayers to be chanted or silence to be observed

The practical implications of this in a hospital, hospice or frail care setting, include:

1. Doctor who issues the death certificate only be called after the body has cooled (4hours minimum)
2. No nursing staff in the room
3. No porters in the room

4. All admin relating to the death to take place outside of this room, and after the 4 hour period
5. No undertakers in the room until after the period has lapsed
6. Family members and Buddhist friends who are present to keep stillness as much as possible
7. *If it should be unavoidable for the body to be touched, to touch it at the crown of the head first.*

**2. From once the body has cooled (approximately 4 hours) up to and including 3.5 days after clinical death:**

- i. Body still to be disturbed as little as possible:
  1. If death occurred at home, to be able to keep the remains at home undisturbed for 3.5 days whilst prayers are being observed
  2. If death occurs in a city with a Buddhist temple, to be able to keep the remains in the temple in a designated, air conditioned room, so a prayer vigil may be observed
  3. If there is no home or Buddhist temple, for the remains to be moved to a mortuary *whilst being handled as little as possible*
    - a. *No wrapping in plastic (ideally wrapped in a saffron-died organic cotton shroud)*
    - b. *Placed in an eco coffin (authentic Jewish coffin is adequate) immediately and transported to the mortuary in the coffin, so that all handling of the remains is eliminated. (I.e. just one placing into the coffin, and then transported to, kept, and transported from the mortuary in the same coffin without remains ever having to be handled again. Incidentally, we have successfully had this arrangement with Doves in Observatory since 2004.)*
    - c. *Allow family and Buddhist community to say prayers at the funeral home (if there are facilities to wheel coffin from the mortuary into a "chapel" area)*
    - d. *Transport coffin with remains to final resting place after 3.5 day period*

**3. Buddhist Funeral:** only happens after the 3.5 day period. Here the greatest consideration is that, as far as possible, disposal of the remains is as natural

as possible and does not harm the environment. There is no specific ritual or practice – it will vary from country to country.

For example, in some mountainous countries sky burials are an ideal way to return the remains to the natural cycle, and in other countries this might actually harm the environment (due to harmful chemicals in the remains that poison the carrion birds and adversely affect vulture populations).

Sea burial here where we live close to the sea could be ideal, were it not for legislation that states that the burial happens at deep sea (thus requiring vast amounts of fossil fuels to transport the remains there, as well as the fact that most carrion marine life live in shallower waters.

Furthermore, sea-burial currently requires the remains be covered in a mesh-like fabric, which can be harmful to the marine environment. ) What is environmentally friendly about both of these options is that there is no need for a coffin.

In some countries where wood is plentiful and space is a big concern, cremation might be the best option. Generally speaking, however, cremation is not a green option due to the enormous amount of non-renewable energy that is used in the process. This would apply in the Western Cape where fossil fuels are used at the crematoria. *(A pilot project investigating renewable energy sources, like biogas, would be ideal in our region where sewage is plentiful due to high density population, and where there are already biogas digesters in existence.)*

In the Western Cape, burial is also a difficult choice due to the limited available space, high water tables and rich, yet extremely sensitive biodiversity.

Both cremation and burial rely on coffins and that in itself is an area which deserves research: how to minimise the toxic impact of coffin materials on the environment; and potential job creation opportunities using alien vegetation (in abundance throughout the WC) to produce eco-coffins. *(Should one opt for cremation, being able to cremate without a coffin would be preferable to cremating in a coffin.)*

Attached is a short piece we put together on the subject (Appendix A).

As Buddhists concerned about the impact of funerary practices on the environment, there are two immediate ideal scenarios:

3.1. Shallow, coffinless burials:

3.1.1. Shallow burials allow for quick decomposition of the remains, as the soil is oxygen-rich with aerobic organisms. Permaculture is a field that explores decomposition closely, and examines what conditions allow organic remains (of plant or animal origin) to decompose and become nutrient-rich “compost” rather than simply rot and pollute the ground.

3.1.2. As outlined more clearly in the attached article, coffins play a significant role in polluting the environment; through the process of manufacture, as well as the materials used, and can also slow down the natural decomposition of the remains. Therefore, a coffinless burial – should burial be the chosen funerary rite – would be the ideal. Towards this the City of Cape Town has given us written permission to bury without a coffin. However, we have yet to source a reputable undertaker who would be willing to do this. A Muslim burial would be ideal, and although we've had conversations with one sympathetic undertaker, we have not yet found someone who would do this for us.

*The biggest difference between our, and a Muslim, burial is the time difference – after 3.5 days rather than within 24hours. This does pose the question of hygienic transportation of the remains after such a long period, considering we would ideally like to avoid using any plastic (including adult “diapers” which are toxic to the environment).*

3.2. Ultimately, and we believe with some urgency, alternative methods to burial and cremation, for example Promession<sup>1</sup> that's used successfully in Sweden, the Infinity Burial Suit<sup>2</sup> that is being piloted in the USA and Human Composting<sup>3</sup> as mentioned above, should be explored and tested.

In general, Buddhists, not attached to any particular way of disposing of the remains after the 3.5 day period, are concerned with what would be the most eco-friendly method in any given geographical area at this time.

<sup>1</sup> Promession: <http://www.promessa.se/about-life-death/>

<sup>2</sup> Infinity Burial Suit: [https://www.ted.com/talks/jae\\_rhim\\_lee?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/jae_rhim_lee?language=en)

<sup>3</sup> Human Composting: <http://grist.org/living/how-human-composting-will-change-death-in-the-city/>

[https://www.ted.com/talks/katrina\\_spade\\_when\\_i\\_die\\_recompose\\_me](https://www.ted.com/talks/katrina_spade_when_i_die_recompose_me)

## **Appendix A: Eco-friendly burials & cremations: guidelines for sustainable sourcing and specifications of materials used for containment of human remains**

### **Background**

With the growing and immediate need to move to a more sustainable society, we need to consider all of our activities on the planet. Often the broader social and environmental impacts of major life events are given little attention. To be more sustainable we need to think about our cradle to coffin impacts of our existence on the planet. With that awareness we are presented with a unique opportunity to consider the major life events that we are all party to. Birthing and child rearing, weddings, and our inevitable passing from the planet, are all undervalued opportunities for being more considerate – or even generous – in the choices we make.

Current practices in the funerary industry have yet to prioritise social and environmental considerations, and these guidelines are a small step towards ensuring that we allow our bodily remains and whichever vessel we choose for their containment, to be readily absorbed into the natural environment and returned to the nutrient cycle (or at the very least do no harm to it). The main purpose of these guidelines is to give due consideration to the sustainable sourcing and usage of materials used to manufacture the various enclosures of human remains. Coffins, caskets, shrouds will either be used temporarily (ceremonially), transiently (cremated with the body), or permanently (buried), and it is therefore essential to consider which materials are being used, and where these materials are being sourced.

### **Guidelines**

The focus of these guidelines is specifically on coffins, including the raw materials used for the coffin structure itself, inner lining fabrics, decorative exterior paraphernalia, coatings, and handles. Similar principles would apply to other methods of containing human corpses (such as shrouds, embalming materials, etc.), and the principle extended to the urns used to store ashes of the deceased, tombstones, and any other items directly or indirectly used for containing and burial of human remains.

Specific factors are that need to be addressed include:

- The extent to which these are able to be reincorporated into the nutrient cycle after their period of functionality, and
- The production and full life-cycle impacts of the materials used to construct the coffins (water, energy, and ethical impacts)
- Whether these containments are buried or cremated along with the corpses

Some general guidelines for ecologically friendly coffins are:

- All materials used are free of non-biodegradable, environmentally destructive, or hazardous aggressive materials. Current regulations and by-laws specify exactly what these entail. Examples of undesirable products include any synthetic materials, varnishes containing Methyl or Xylene, plastics, and all metals.
- Materials must permit sufficient structural integrity, while being readily biodegradable if buried, or free from hazardous by-products if cremated.
- Manufacturers and the rest of the funerary industry should encourage full disclosure of life cycle embedded impact of the materials. Guidelines exist for

disclosure of other consumables which may be adapted for coffins and caskets, however would broadly include items such as embedded energy and water required for farming, construction, handling and transportation of the materials used to build the coffin, as well as waste and by-products generated in the production.

- Preferred alternatives for the coffin, as well as the inner linings and outer decorations include (as appropriate) natural organic fibres: hemp, cotton, bamboo fibres, saw grass, banana leaves, wicker, or other compostable material for the coffin. The practices of followers of the Jewish and Muslim faith set a good example in this regard in that a plain pine box (with rope handles) or a cotton shroud are used respectively.
- Funeral directors should disclose that burying without a coffin, if requested on religious grounds, is a legal option for anyone in South Africa (not just those following Islam).
- Timber or other plant matter should be sourced from sustainable forest plantation (or derived from products linked to environmental restoration such as alien vegetation).
- Rare and illicit or illegally harvested hardwoods should be avoided, and prohibited for use in casket manufacture.
- For traditions that require a highly decorative casket, one alternative could be a temporary decorative outer coffin (also sustainably produced), which is designed to contain the more basic coffin within it for the duration of the ceremonial practice.

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## References

1. Eco-funerals: 2-part article in the [The Green Times](#).
  2. Listed activities and associated minimum emission standards identified in terms of Section 21 of the National Environmental Management: Air Quality Act, 2004 (Act no. 39 of 20(4)) "Section 17. Category 8: Disposal of hazardous and general waste" covers crematoria emissions
  3. Provincial Government of the Western Cape: Local Authority By-Law 12649 City of Cape Town: Air Pollution Control By-law
  4. Provincial Government of the Western Cape: Local Authority By-Law 13333 City of Cape Town: Environmental Health By-law
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