

THE FUNERAL CUSTOMS OF THE MONS.

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Some time ago a friend wrote saying he had attended a Mon funeral and asking why certain things he had witnessed were done on such occasions. This suggested to me the idea of writing on the subject of this paper. I find it is very common for people to ask why certain things are done when things appear strange to them, but it is not easy to give satisfactory answers. On this matter of the customs at Mon funerals I have a book that professes to give the origin of such customs, and the reasons for some of them. On close examination, however, one finds that it is rather a didactical treatise intended to encourage the devout in the practice of their religion. From the Buddhist standpoint it is rather a fine piece of devotional reading. From the point of view of the enquirer into the funeral customs its chief value lies in its tabulation of the various practices connected with the reverent and affectionate laying away of the remains of the dead. This booklet of some twenty pages of palmleaf manuscript is entitled "Anissamsa Kammathān", which being translated is "The Advantage of a Dead Body". The idea is that there is profit to the living in considering the various things that are done to the dead before they are finally laid away from sight. We shall return to this little book later.

In writing at some length on this subject in "The Talaings" I made use of another and somewhat longer work, which set forth the practices to be observed in the varied conditions and circumstances under which death at times takes place. From that work we can learn the only real reason for the various practices observed in connection with the dead, and that is, that custom kept alive by tradition has decreed that these various observances cannot be lightly set aside. In fact there is great danger to those who neglect them. In borrowing the copy of this work, "Lokasamutti", which has always been readily placed at my disposal, some weeks ago, the owner of it remarked to me with concern that there was now far too much neglect of its rulings. In this case, although like many other books, the origin is referred back to the Buddha's time, there is no reference to the religion

except as the monks and other religions are mentioned in, the carrying out of the various practices, as for instance, when gifts to the monks are forbidden in certain circumstances, or when a religious mendicant is the proper person to carry out a certain act. From this it is very evident that the origins of the customs are anterior to the introduction of Buddhism among the people. The explanations usually offered when people ask the reason for the various practices are to be discredited as of no actual value to the earnest enquirer. I feel quite content when I can find out what seems to be general practice either in one special form or in variations of it. In this paper I shall simply state what I have seen and heard of the practices.

A circumstance which strikes one at the very outset, when one comes into close contact with death amongst this people is the preparations made for the last scenes, and for burial or its equivalent as soon as death is seen to be inevitable. Not long ago word was brought to me that an aged person in whom I was interested was nearing his end. As confirmatory of this I was told that the house was being arranged for death. On reaching the house I found that the inner room in which the old man lay adying as it was thought, had been cleared of everything not actually needed. Mats were spread on the floor with cushions here and there, and curtains had been hung up, and a canopy of white cloth was being prepared. There was of course no ceiling. Such relatives as had been able to answer the summons had gathered in and were sitting about in the death chamber or helping with the preparations in the outer part of the house. Later in the day, those who had been out in the fields and further away also came, some not getting there till late at night. It was in this case the head of a family when more attention is paid to this act of respect and reverence, but even in other cases there is always a measure of this attitude in the near presence of death. Then I found the family anxious for what they called the service for the living, which they deemed a very desirable thing. It seems that the act of death is to be seriously recognised from the religious point of view, though one wonders whether the people do not see some magical influence in the observance. The dying in his extremity is addressed as "Arahain" "saint", as if he had attained

arhatship, though whether the people recognise the full signification is quite another thing.

It is not considered out of place to begin at once to make preparations for the last respects even before the death actually takes place, when that event is seen to be near. The coffin is sometimes being made whilst the dying is still conscious. In fact, there are cases when it is deemed fitting to have everything ready to carry out the funeral rites as soon as life is extinct. This is the course of procedure in the case of a person dying in a strange village as indicated in the book "Lokasamutti". When a person is seen to be dying in a village other than his own, it is fitting that his family and relatives should seek out the necessary things for offerings and cremation before death actually takes place so that the corpse can be carried forth at once. Haste is also needed in the case of contagious and other loathsome diseases, and then often no time is taken even to make a coffin, but the body is carried forth with mats and blankets.

In ordinary cases, however, as soon as death has actually occurred, the women take charge in the house and the men in the street, and one will hear the wailing of the women, and see the men busy erecting an awning to shelter the coffin-makers and the musicians. You can never be in any doubt in passing a house where a corpse is lying.

In the bathing of the corpse there is rather a curious arrangement, though what might be its origin, or what its signification, I do not know. The body is bathed by pouring over it seven water-pots of water. The water has to be drawn by seven persons each born on a different day of the week. In proceeding to the well the one born on Sunday goes first, followed by the one born on Monday, the one born on Tuesday, and so on. When the water has been drawn, the drawers keep their order, but the one born on Saturday now leads the way, and the one born on Sunday comes last. According to the booklet "Anissainsa Kammathān" already mentioned, the water should be first boiled and then cooled. When the bathing has been accomplished a chew is put in the mouth of the dead and a piece of money. The two thumbs are tied together, and the big toes with cotton thread. Two pieces of split bamboo the length of the corpse

are placed along the sides of the coffin. These are the bamboo rests for the corpse.

When the body has been dressed and coffined, a suitable structure is made on which to rest the coffin, with a canopy over it. Here the body lies in state till the time of carrying forth, whether long or short, and may be viewed by all as the coffin is left open. It is a duty of the living to view the dead, and reflect on this end of life. A light is placed at each end of the coffin—*pamot parang* at the head, and *pamot kere* at the foot. The latter is in a pot set in a basin of chaff standing on a tripod.

In carrying away the coffin from the house some peculiar customs are observed. The "Anissainsa Kammathān" says the corpse must not be taken out of the house by the door, because it is the way used by the household, but that the wall must be broken open. This, it seems, is according to circumstances. At a funeral in Ayuthia Monthon I was told that the rule was that the corpse must not pass under a cross beam. In Siam the main part of the house is in three sections, and the body must not be passed from one section to another. If death took place in the middle section which usually has the door, the coffin could be taken out at the door. Otherwise the wall must be broken open, and the body taken through the breach. Sometimes the dying one was removed to the middle section before death took place, so that the body could be carried out at the door. According to the "Lokasamutti", it is only under certain circumstances that the ordinary door cannot be used. It is pretty much the same with the use or non-use of the ordinary stair, although I think that in all cases something is done in case of the stair. At one funeral, I saw the ordinary stair used with a slim bamboo cane laid against it. At another place I saw the coffin carried down quite a different stair at the opposite part of the house. Sometimes the stair is simply turned over. A Mon stair is usually detachable—a biggish short ladder of five steps. It would seem, therefore, that these things are done so that there may be no fault to find.

There is quite a definite understanding as to the road that must be taken to the cemetery. When death takes place outside the village or town, the body must not be brought into the village. Hence even when the nearest road to the cemetery would be through

the village, if the death takes place outside the bounds the long roundabout way must be followed rather than come into the village again. The town of Ye in the Amherst District of Tenasserim, Lower Burma, stands on the site of an old city. Deaths taking place outside the old city wall though in the modern town have to be taken away another way rather than bring them within the old bounds. In villages on the Menam Chao Phaya, Siam, the coffin is taken to the water's edge and put on a boat to be taken to the monastery grounds where the cemetery is. On the Meklong where the water is not convenient for this purpose, the coffin is carried out to the edge of the fields, to avoid passing through the village, and carried round to the monastery, where the service is held and the cremation takes place.

In carrying the coffin, away from the house, a looking-glass is to be taken, and a knife. With the knife the path is to be scratched. The bearers are forbidden to look round behind, but are to keep their eyes fixed on the looking-glass, and on the knife carried before. A drinking vessel of water is to be carried, and a coconut. The coconut is to be broken open, and the water in it and the drinking vessel sprinkled on the corpse. On arrival at the cemetery, the coffin is to be turned round three times, and then placed on the pyre. It is here the corpse is to be sprinkled, and the cords tying the thumbs and big toes are to be cut, and then the fire is to be applied. There does not seem to have been any religious service in the original procedure. The present day Buddhistic service could only be introduced after the coming of the religion in any case. But even in the booklet mentioned which gives the rites a Buddhistic origin, no mention is made of a religious service.

There is always now a service held at the cemetery and sometimes also one at the monastery. I propose to describe them as I have seen them. The service I attended at a monastery took place in the preaching hall. There were mats spread at one end of the hall for the monks, the people occupying the main part of the building. The officiating monk sat with legs crossed, on a raised pulpit standing in the middle of the back part of the hall. The coffin was brought in, and the people made a request for the reading of the law. Tapers were then distributed and

lighted. It was explained to me that this was an offering to the law. The three refuges and the five precepts were repeated by the people, after which the monk read in a clear voice what purported to be a discourse of the Buddha. Following this there was another service at the place of cremation. The coffin was opened, the corpse turned face down, and the bottom knocked out of the coffin. The three times turning round of the coffin also took place here. We were all again presented with fire lighters, and it was the privilege of everyone to help in lighting the pyre.

At another funeral on the banks of the Meklong, the coffin was carried right from the house to the place of cremation. It was the funeral of a Kamnan's wife, and over forty monks were present. The people made the three reverences to the monks and asked for the service. The monks first repeated the *Namo* in praise of the Buddha, response by the people following. The three refuges were recited by the monks, the people following responsively. In the same way the five precepts were repeated. This was followed by something I did not catch. The Pali service usual on such occasions was now intoned by the monks, one of whom acted as leader. The people sat in worshipful attitude with their palms placed together. Some growing tired or forgetting, relaxed by and by and sat more at ease. Some women sat chatting and wanted to converse with anyone who would do so. At the close the people bowed and repeated some formula.

There is a curious custom of throwing a cloth across the burning pyre from one person to another. Some say any cloth may be used, but one booklet says it is the cloth that covered the corpse, and is to be thrown three times. In the booklet a reason is given for it, but that I take it is only a pious reflection on the act. There may, however, be something in the fact that whilst it has been passed through the fire it remains unscathed by the fire. But see the explanation given under.

There are many restrictions in certain defined cases. For a child under ten years no coffin should be made, and cremation is not allowed. Suicides, and people killed by lightning are to be buried standing and the forehead left bare on top. I have no actual instance of this, however. Should the person struck by lightning

die on the spot, he must be buried there. If death results at home the burial may take place in the cemetery.

I should like to close with a brief résumé of the pious reflections of the author of "Anissamsa Kammathān". Nothing whatever of our bodies is imperishable; and all must come to the condition of a dead body without fail.

The firewood signifies merit and demerit—sin and righteousness ill deeds and good deeds. These stir our minds like the heating of water; the former leads us on to the place of punishment and the latter brings us to the condition of bliss. The three stones on which the pot is boiled are the three stages,* the worlds of Desire, of Form and of absence of Form, through which it is fitting that men must make their way until Nirvāna the realm of bliss is attained.

The pot signifies our frail body, and the water boiled in it the attachment of the five senses. When the fire has burned out a person has reached the state of sanctification.

The threads tying the thumbs and great toes are the three snares namely, children who snare the neck, property which snares the feet, and wives who hold the hands. These attachments the sharpest knife cannot sever nor could ages of wearing of water make us free. The sharp knife which cuts the cord is the wise effort by which Nirvāna is attained.

The pieces of split bamboo put along the two sides of the corpse direct men to the way pointed out by the Allwise, whereby we may put aside wrong views and attain right ones.

The four cross pieces in the couch are the four *Apāyās*, the eight abodes of heavenly bliss and the four Brahma heavens, which if a man knows he may by contemplation free himself from the miseries of life and attain the realm of Nirvāna.

The corpse must not be taken out at the door because it is the way for the household to come and go. The wall must be broken down. In this we are following the example of the royal *Suddhodhana*ⁿ of the Sākya tribe.

* *Kāmāvacarabhūmi*, *rūpāvacarabhūmi* *arūpāvacarabhūmi*. According to our booklet the first comprises hell, the preta world, the asura world; the world of beasts, of men, and of angels (the six *devālokas*). The second comprises, the sixteen heavens of corporeal Brahmas, and the third the four heavens of formless Brahmas.

ⁿ The father of Gotama Buddha.

The corpse is carried out with the head to the front as the Buddha did with his august father. Before that time it was usual to carry with the feet first.

We repeat the five precepts on arrival at the cemetery, because on the death of the Bodhisatva as Chaddanta five hundred Pratyeka Buddhas came and recited the vinaya precepts.

The cloth covering the body is thrown across the fire three times to show the imperishable nature of the three stages. One must enjoy or suffer according to one's merit or demerit.

The path is scratched to signify that there must be no going back, but a straight course for Nirvāna maintained.

The mirror is carried in front and no glance made behind, because there must be no going back on the old life, but the view kept ever forward to the attainment of bliss.

The sharp knife signifies the knowledge which enables us to cut away the evil actions which beset us, and so free ourselves from misery.

The coffin is turned round three times to make people reflect and not pray for the continual course of the three stages.

The cocoanut water is pure water undisturbed, and not like the river or the sea water which is muddy and clear by turns, just as in life in this struggle merit and demerit alternate.

Money is put in the mouth of the corpse to show the utter worthlessness of worldly wealth. The bliss of Nirvāna is the true wealth.

They put a chew in the mouth to show that whilst in life the mouth is prone to speak all kinds of evil to the detriment of others, in death it cannot even chew its own quid, another has to chew for it.

On return from the cemetery the tables and trays have to be overturned, because men must be turned with their face to the ground, and that they may meditate on heavenly bliss.

I have thus given a faint idea of the pious reflections of a religious Mon on the things his people do in laying away the dead from sight. If it at the same time helps to fix attention on the various Mon funeral customs the purpose of my paper will be answered.