

Questions & Answers on Faith: What's the Buddhist View of Cemeteries?

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Q: I understand that the SGI-USA is opening a cemetery in the United States. Does this mean I should be buried there? What does Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism teach about what should be done with a person's remains?

A: The SGI-USA has made arrangements for cemetery property at a memorial park in Los Angeles at the request of members, mainly pioneer members and their families. Though such a facility is now available, no one ought to feel as if they "should" be buried there, and of course no special benefit accrues from being so. Still, some people feel comforted by the fact that their remains are buried next to comrades in faith in a specially designated area.

From the Buddhist viewpoint, how to deal with a person's remains is a matter of personal choice. Buddhism does not specify how funerals should be conducted; it doesn't discuss whether the deceased's remains should be cremated or buried or dealt with in any other manner. Buddhism's primary focus is on how to live, how to manifest Buddhahood.

In 13th century Japan, the time of the Daishonin, the culture was such that people would take the ashes of loved ones to a sacred place. Naturally, the Daishonin respected the customs of the time and country. We can read in the Goshō of the son of Abutsu-bo, a believer on Sado Island, visiting the Daishonin at Mount Minobu with his father's ashes. There is also the story of Toki Jonin, a believer in what is today Chiba, visiting the Daishonin with his mother's ashes. While the Daishonin embraced these acts of faith and filial piety, he did not teach that taking remains to a sacred place or to a revered person is necessary in Buddhist practice.

The Lotus Sutra states, "There is no need to enshrine the relics of the Buddha there" (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 165). Implied here is that we should respect the Buddha's teaching, not the Buddha's remains. The Buddha's remains were not meant to be a holy object of worship.

When it comes to the remains of loved ones, it's only natural for us to handle them with respect and love. Such feelings accord with the Buddha's compassion for all humanity. But Buddhism asserts that the remains are no more than remains. Therefore, how the remains are handled — cremated or not, buried in a cemetery, buried at sea, buried in an SGI cemetery, kept in an urn at home or scattered somewhere — has nothing to do with the deceased's future happiness and well-being.

The most important thing is the life-condition a person displays at the moment of his or her death. Also important is the happiness the surviving family shows, for the causes we make in this life affect our families, according to Buddhist scripture, many generations in the past and many generations in the future. Our prayers for the deceased offered day and night during gongyo especially contribute to our loved ones' happiness.

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[This article is based upon the book Common Sense and Uncommon Sense in Buddhist Formalities authored by the Association of Youthful Priests Dedicated to the Reformation of Nichiren Shoshu, available only in Japanese.]

Title: What's the Buddhist View of Cemeteries?

Subject: World Tribune 06/05/98 n.3194 p.6 WT980605p06

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Keywords: Answers Buddhist Cemeteries Concepts Death Faith Life Questions Study Terms Tribune View World