



INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICES, INC.

1903 n street, n.w. washington, d. c. 20036

Larry Woodson  
Luang Prabang, Laos  
January 1, 1965

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So Death is a happy event. The complexity of the funeral rites shows how important this event is looked upon. A written tradition reveals that these rites were actually laid down in the remote past by King Sommutiraj. He edicted rules that applied to different types of death, distinguishing between the cases where cremation applied and those to which burial only was allowed. This manuscript fixed six different kinds of deceased: those who drowned, those thunder-struck, those who fell from trees, those killed by tigers, those by hanging and lastly, those who died of disease.

Among all these different causes of death, the natural one from disease, confers the right to great privileges. Those who suffered violent death shall not be cremated, but buried without delay. According to religion and custom their mortal remains shall not be kept at home more than 24 hours. The Buddha gives advice on the subject, showing himself a fully qualified hygienist and experienced physician.

The parents close the eyes of the deceased, then wash the body with a profusion of warm and scented water. They insert a silver coin or a piece of gold between the teeth of the deceased, to emphasize that no value should be attached to worldly goods and that of all his past wealth, this negligible amount placed in his mouth is all death has allowed the deceased to

take away with him. The white cotton threads twisted around his neck, his wrist and his feet only show how fragile are the bonds holding man to the earth; material interest, affections, love, so many fleeting links that death has come to put an end to without any regard to possible consequences. At last, after being covered with an immaculate shroud, the deceased will be placed in a coffin made of six wooden boards assembled with some sticky resin found in the forest. This coffin is only temporary, later his children will have another one specially made to be used during the cremation.

The coffin is placed on trunks of banana trees; this softer wood is chosen instead of the harder kind, thus symbolizing the brevity of life and as these trunks lack heart wood it also means that man is without any consistency. The monks then arrive and recite the words of the Buddha: "Life is fleeting and the recurrence of birth and death is an endless and normal process. The body is nothing once the soul has left it and soon it will be as worthless on the earth as the trunk of a dead tree. You have performed many good deeds while on earth; may they be taken into account."

While the monks are praying and the parents keep a night virgil over the mortal remains laying in the coffin, the workers are preparing the catafalque and putting the last touches on the ornamentations of the bier. Meanwhile life goes on in joyful animation. The parents take part in the activities and cannot express their grieves too openly as this would be a sign of poor manners also if expressed too loudly it might hold back the soul of the departed and prevent it from flying to the blissful land of the great beyond.

In some cases the actual funeral does not occur until four months later. The body is then taken out of the temporary bier, and placed in a new coffin specially prepared for the funeral. Before sealing the remains forever, some fresh perfumes are poured over the face of the corpse. The style of the coffin varies from place to place.

During the cremation, which lasts six days and nights, the catafalque is mounted on two giant birds and is being pulled symbolically with a white cotton string, but actually pushed by a team of men, specially chosen for their strength. Now that the final separation is near, the wife and children have had their heads shaven clean and are dressed in white robes.

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Larry Woodson  
American Embassy(IVS/ED)  
APO San Francisco 96352

Address should be exactly as it appears above. Do not add "California"