

## Death and Cremation

Cremation in Hinduism is classified as the last *samskara* (life cycle rites); the last ritual to perform that concludes a life. Cremation is considered a *samskara* because it is changing the state of the person from one realm to another; it is viewed as a medium between life and the ancestral realm (*pitr-loka*). There are many different frameworks as to how the cremation ritual is completed, yet the outcome is always the same. Cremation is an important aspect of Hinduism because it is freeing the spirit from the current world. Sacrifices, transformations, and the knowledge of how to perform the ritual surrounding the cremation are all aspects of this particular *samskara*.

Knipe, as quoted in Richard Davis' *Cremation and Liberation: The Revision Of A Hindu Ritual* states, " With few exceptions, the Hindu rites at the time of death and the procedures for cremation (*antyeshti*) are fairly uniform throughout the regions of India...This conformity in ritual across vedic, epic, puranic, and agamic periods, and on into modern practice, is remarkable" (39). A basic intention of the cremation ritual is to prevent the spirit from coming back and haunting its family. This basic intention can be known as a *Preta* (spirits that are not properly installed in the ancestral realm) [haunting/harassing the family- this information can be found and expanded upon in the Hinduism eBook (177)]. Death throughout the Hindu tradition is looked upon as dangerous because it is during this time that the body is between cycles of life and rebirth. Weightman states that in Hinduism, the prevailing "fire and its illumination symbolize either the cosmic cycle of creation and dissolution or *samsara* [To flow together; to wander; the cycle of repeated rebirths], the earthly cycle of birth and death" (1).

Davis further support the notion of birth and death cycles, as stated above by Weightman, by illustrating another aspect of the cremation ritual. This aspect is known as the third birth.

Davis argues, “A person is indeed born three times, as follows: First he is born from his mother and father. One whose lot is to sacrifice is born a second time when he performs sacrifice. He is born a third time when he dies, and is placed upon the fire, and he arises again...” (41). Death and cremation are the processes that allow the spirit from the dead body to leave this world and enter the ancestral realm, where the bodies “...receive nourishment through the *sraddha* [funerary rites] offerings made by his descendants” (Davis 41). Death is not viewed as the final stage in Hinduism; it is merely a transition from one place to another.

Cremation is the main ritual for disposing of a body in Hinduism (Davis 44). “[T]his same basic physical and ritual act of cremation has been very differently conceived and has performed very different functions within different metaphysical frameworks”(Davis 44-45). In other words, although cremation is the preferred method, there are numerous different ways to understand this last *samskara* (Davis 44). For example, cremation is a path for some into the ancestral realm, while for others, like the Saiva Siddhanta [a group of people who worship the god Siva above all others; Siva centered groups] it is defined as the souls last barrier on the path to *moksa* [liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth] (Davis 45). In both instances the rituals performed are designed so each individual can be set in the right direction for the next stage of the transformation (Davis 45). Both Weightman and Davis emphasize the importance of the life cycle rites; the importance of death and rebirth in the Hinduism tradition.

In contradiction with dominant western religions, funerals in the Hindu religion can take place only hours after the death has occurred. The funerals are performed after the purification rites have been performed [purification rituals are performed on the deceased to rid him or her of all impurities before the transformation into the other realm occurs]. However, “[T]he waiting period from ascertained death to the elimination of the corpse by cremation, can extend up to

three and a half days” (Filippi 131). This promptness is due in large part to the fact that there is a fear among those close to the deceased that something could happen to the body. This is also why it is now routine to carry the body to the cremation site (Filippi 131).

Once it is certain that the individual has passed away, kinsmen care for the body by first cleaning it and then decorating it. It is at this point in time that the body is transferred to the cremation grounds [cremation grounds are called *smasana* and are often located outside of the city. More information can be found in *Dying the Good Death* by Christopher Justice]. Davis describes the intricacies of the beginning of the cremation ritual as follows, “Like any sacrificial terrain, the place of cremation must be ritually constituted. The officiant, preferably the eldest son of the deceased, purifies the ground by sprinkling water, circling the spot counterclockwise...” (45). Once all of this has been completed and the body is facing south [this is done so the deceased is facing the kingdom of Yama; more information can be found in Gian Giuseppe Filippi’s *MRYTU: Concept of Death In Indian Traditions*], the sacrificial wood is brought in and fires are started in three different places around the pyre (Davis 45). The body is then laid upon the pyre with the individual’s personal sacrificial offerings placed around and on the being (Davis 44). Davis provides examples of items placed on the individual by stating how, “The sacrificial spoon [is] in his right hand, the wooden ladle in his left, the wooden stirring sword on his right side, the ladle used in fire oblation on his left...” (45). In accordance with Davis, Filippi states that depending on which class you are from, a certain item will be placed into the individual’s hand. For example, if one were born into the *Brahmin* [priests and scholars] class, a piece of gold is placed in the hand, but if one were born into the *vaisya* [merchant] class, a jewel would be placed in the hand [more information can be found in Gian Giuseppe Filippi’s *MRYTU: Concept of Death In Indian Traditions* 137]. Certain items are placed around the body

on the pyre because it is these items that the deceased has previously practiced sacrificial rituals with. They are returned back to him during the cremation ritual (Davis 45). Normally the eldest son (the officiate) will then contribute his own offering into the ritual in support of certain gods and a *Rg mantra* will also be recited while the pyre is lit from the three sacrificial fires (Davis 45). The reason the cremation ritual is often performed by someone the deceased has known is because it is assumed that the individual will undeniably arrive in heaven along with the smoke of the fires if the ritual is performed this way (Davis 45).

Once the cremation has taken place the officiate circles the ritual site three times (in reverse direction) with a jar that sits upon his left shoulder. The officiant will then moisten the ground by drizzling droplets of water and when he reaches a position that is near the head of the dead body, he will break the jar and leave. He will then be followed by the others at the ritual (Davis 45). After the ritual has been performed the individuals who knew the deceased will experience a period of impurity (*savasauca*). The length of the period of impurity varies depending on how well they knew the deceased. After this is done, the family will then perform the *sraddha* rites that will ritually place the body into another realm. The reason *sraddha* is performed is because it replaces the old body that was cremated (Davis 46).

After the cremation ritual, Parry states that “A funeral priest presides over the rituals performed by relatives for the “ghost” of the departed for eleven days after cremation, accepting gifts from the deceased’s family. It is his [funeral priest] job to confer salvation and allow the soul of the departed to “swim across” to the other world” (Gesler and Pierce 1). The rituals that are performed post cremation are just as important as the cremation ritual itself because it is these rituals that send the ghost or spirit of the deceased to the ancestral *pitr-loka* [world of ancestors] (Gesler and Pierce). This is why eating is seen as an important aspect of the post

cremation ritual; the old body must be “eaten” when the soul of the deceased attains a new body (Gesler, Pierce). “The Brahman priest who performs the ceremonies is likened to a medieval European alchemist who, using a philosopher’s stone, can turn base metal into gold, or to the Ganges, which transforms the city’s sewage into holy water” (Gesler and Pierce 1). Cremation rituals and post cremation rituals are equally important.

Banaras is thought to be a place in India that is very important for cremation. Thousands upon thousands of bodies are brought there every year to be cremated. In 1989 alone 24,000 bodies were brought in from around the world to be cremated there [more information can be found in *Dying The Good Death* by Christopher Justice]. It was also found that many will make a one way trip to Banaras to die there and be thrown into the Ganges River (Justice 21). Some families even send the cremated remains to Banaras in order for their loved ones to be placed in the Ganges River; this is common when the whole funeral procession cannot be done there due to external circumstances (Justice 21). Varanasi also holds an extremely elevated position in the eyes of many Hindus for their final resting place. However, no matter where the cremation takes place, the ritual is believed to be equally important.

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<http://www.geocities.com/lamberdar/cremation.html>  
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