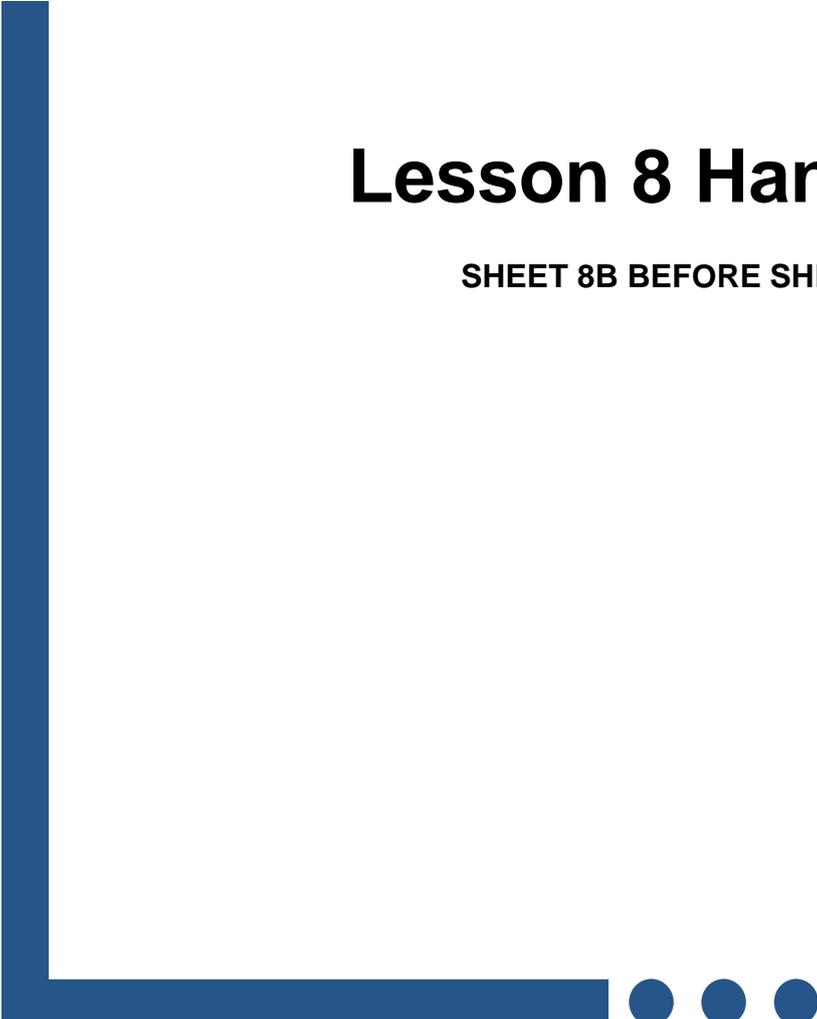




University Learning in Schools

RE

Buddhists in the World



Lesson 8 Handouts

SHEET 8B BEFORE SHEET 8A

Sheet 8b

The Death of the Buddha

When he was close to death the Buddha identified four places of future pilgrimage: the sites of his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death. He went on to say "But don't hinder yourself by honouring my remains".

His last words were; "Listen, Bhikkhus, I say this: all conditioned things are subject to decay, strive with diligence for your liberation".

The Buddha was cremated and his ashes were eventually spread across Asia. Stupas (mounds that are marked with buildings) are used to mark the sites of the Buddha's remains. These are sites of meditation and remembrance of the Buddha.

1. Why do you think Buddhists make pilgrimages to these four sites?
2. What did the Buddha want his followers to spend their lives searching for (it relates to the cycle of samsara)?
3. Do Buddhists follow the Buddha's request "But don't hinder yourself by honouring my remains"?

Theravadan Buddhism

Buddhists are encourage to think about, and reflect upon, their future death. They usually do this as part of their meditation. As they are dying many Buddhists will be supported by their community or leaders to accept their death and to approach it calmly and understand that life is impermanent and that death is inevitable and part of the cycle of samsara. This might involve talking about their death, meditating together, chanting, or discussing plans for their funeral.

In India the early Buddhists followed the customs of the people around them and usually cremated their dead. The Buddha himself was cremated and this has gone on to influence Buddhists today – many are still cremated. Although as more Buddhists live in countries where burial is more common they are also adopting this practice.

1. How can the Buddhist community help those who are dying? What beliefs might they talk about with the dying person?
2. Why did the early Buddhists cremate the dead? (Try and give two reasons).

Around the world Buddhism has been influenced by the cultures in which it developed.

Tibetan Buddhism (Mahayana)

In Tibet the ground was not always suitable for burial, and there was little firewood, so 'sky burial' became common. Monks conduct these sky burials. The dead body is chopped into pieces and given the vultures. The monks chant while this is happening. Usually family (also non-Tibetans are banned) do not attend the ceremony and the taking of photos is forbidden. For poorer Tibetan Buddhists they can't afford to pay the monks to conduct the ceremonies and the bodies of the dead are simply left out for the vultures. The Chinese occupying Tibetan tried to outlaw sky burials but they have recently returned.

The sky burial acts as final act of generosity to the vultures. The Tibetan name is 'jhator' and means giving to the birds. It is also a reminder about the importance of non-attachment (to their own body) and the impermanence of everything (including life).

In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism it is believed that between death and rebirth there is an intermediate period – called Antarabhava in Sanskrit, or the Bardo in Tibetan. It is an important period which has an influence on the form that the rebirth shall take. If the family ensures that proper assistance in the form of prayer and remembrance ceremonies are duly performed, the departed is better able to take a favourable rebirth. For Tibetan Buddhists these ceremonies and prayers are contained in the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead'. These are read to the dying person and are useful for both the dying person and those close to them.

Questions:

1. What is a sky burial?
2. Why were Tibetan Buddhists not cremated like the Buddha was? (How has the geography of Tibet affected the religious practice of Tibetan Buddhism?)
3. What does sky-burial show about what Buddhist believe on a) how to treat others (including non-human life) and b) the value of material things (including our bodies)?
4. The prayer and ceremonies are intended to help the deceased person gain a favourable rebirth, but they also help the deceased person's relatives. How do you think they might help them?

Adapted from www.buddhanet.net, www.urbandharma.org, and www.insightmeditationcenter.org.

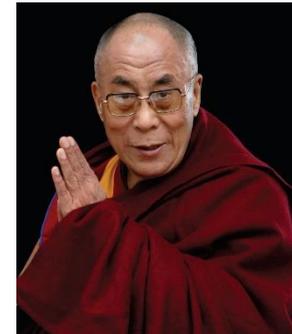
Sheet 8A

What is impermanence?

What can we learn from the death of young people according to the Dalai Lama?

Which other Buddhist beliefs that you have learnt about link to this quote?

“Some people, sweet and attractive and strong and healthy, happen to die young. They are masters in disguise teaching us about impermanence.” *Dalai Lama*



What does the Dalai Lama mean by ‘masters in disguise’?

What do Buddhists think will happen to these young people after death?

Do you think that Buddhists still grieve for the dead?