

DANAM CONFERENCE 2005

SESSION 3

Theme: Dying, Death and Afterlife in Dharma Traditions and Western Religions

Adarsh Deepak, DANAM, and **Rita D. Sherma**, Binghamton University, *Conveners*
Graham Schweig, Christopher Newport University, *Presiding*

ABSTRACTS

Arindam Chakrabarti, University of Hawaii at Manoa

What is It Like to Die? Analytical Assessment of Ancient Indian Vedic Philosophical Concerns with Death

The Vedic mind has reflected incessantly about the phenomenology of dying. With a brief introduction to the early RgVedic notions of death as a phenomenon and as a deity, the paper proceeds to unpack the meaning of the Br.hadaaran.yaka Upanishad parable of the world coming out of Death (mr.tyu) taking the form of Hunger, as interpreted by S'amkara and more recently by K.C. Bhattacharya (1907). Is there a concept of rebirth in the early Upanishads? Yes, there clearly is. We then try to make sense of the entrenched doctrine—also discussed in the Bhagavadgita—of the two alternative routes for the journey of the dead—the smoky route of the ancestors (pitr.-yaana), and the luminous route of the gods (deva-yaana). The second and main part of the paper is a presentation of the standard Nyaya analytical arguments against the Caarvaaka materialist challenge that death is the final end of life and that there is no self other than the living conscious physical body. The ethical meaning of the Shraddha (funeral) rituals is touched upon. In conclusion some controversies (discussed in Caraka Samhitaa) regarding the usefulness of medicine in the face of a deterministic attitude towards who is destined to die when are brought up.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, University of San Diego

Death, Afterlife, and In-Between: Buddhist Perspectives

Abstract: Buddha Sakyamuni's teachings on impermanence are a way of waking human beings up to the reality of death and reminding them to live a meaningful life. The Buddha emphasized the fact that death comes to all living beings, but that is not the only problem. Appropriating the prevalent South Asian belief in rebirth, he taught that, unless living being manage to liberate themselves from the repetitive cycle of birth and death (*samsara*), they will unavoidably take another existence in one of five (later six) realms or migrations (*jati*), all characterized by unsatisfactoriness (*duhkah*). Dying and the intermediate state also present valuable opportunities for realization, liberation, and enlightenment. This paper will discuss diverse Buddhist views on the nature of these opportunities and their bioethical implications.

Christopher K. Chapple, Loyola Marymount University, San Diego

Dying, and Death in Jaina Dharma Traditions

This paper is a study of voluntary death through fasting. This practice is followed in the Jaina tradition when death is imminent due to disease or when one is unable to function self-sufficiently. In the case of Jaina monks, the fast might commence when one is no longer able to abide by monastic rules governing nonviolent behavior due to the debility of old age or infirmity. The fast unto death generally takes place at the close of a normal lifespan. It would be

unacceptable for a young, healthy person to enter the final fast. No political statement is necessarily being made by the fast and the violence required for this death is minimal. No one has forced the individuals into this choice, although social and religious expectations set the stage for the fast unto death as a possibility within the Jaina tradition.

Alan Segal, Columbia University

Death and Afterlife in Western Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam

This paper will concern the two major views of the afterlife in Western Religion: immortality of the soul and resurrection of the dead. It will show how various kinds of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam opt for one or the other or a combination of the two and suggest some of the social reasons why one rather than the other predominates at any one time.