

# Sermons

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## June - Funeral by Issho Fujita

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It could be said, perhaps, that human culture and civilization started with funerals. The act of performing funerals sharply distinguishes humans from animals. Animals might grieve over the death of fellow creatures, but they never bury dead bodies with burial accessories. Only humans take care of their dead and have special rites to send the dead to the next world whether in a primitive way or a sophisticated way. For us, death is not only a biological event but also a spiritual matter.



All of us, without exception, are mortal. So it is essential for us to create appropriate forms for the disposition of a corpse, the emotional healing of a bereaved family/relatives/friends, and the recovery of a community's integration after someone's death. We need to approach this matter of funerals very seriously because to think about how to mourn for the dead is directly related to thinking about how to die, and eventually leads us to think about how to live.

There can be many different ways to grieve someone's passing, to maintain the dignity of the deceased, to pay our respects, and to send those we have lost out to the next world. The manner in which a funeral is performed varies depending on how people view life and death. For example, in the case of funerals in Japan, we can find elements of native shamanism, Shintoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

In the Soto School, when someone dies, first a priest is called to perform a vigil (tsuya). And then (usually the next day) a funeral ceremony (honso) is held at the family home, a temple, or a funeral home. After the funeral, the corpse is taken to a crematory. There, the mourners pick up the skeletal remains with chopsticks and put them in an urn. This urn is eventually—after ceremonies on the forty-ninth day after death—consigned to a tomb or an ossuary.

The main part of the Sotoshu funeral is a ritual to make the deceased a disciple of Buddha by performing tonsure (only as a gesture) and by bestowing the sixteen precepts, a precept name, and a lineage certificate. After giving the precepts, the officiant offers the following words:

*"When sentient beings receive Buddhist precepts, they enter the rank of all the buddhas. When one's rank is the same as the greatly awakened, truly one is a child of all the Buddhas. Hail great pity, great compassion, and great mercy, which embrace us."*

In this way we are calling out to the dead person, wishing him/her to continue walking (practicing) on the path of the Buddha even after death. Because death is a departure from this world, this is a sort of heartfelt prayer that we offer for the dead to have a safe journey. It is a very natural and pristine feeling, something very human; we need not rigidly assume the existence of a soul after death.

These days, in many developed countries, funerals are often handled by professional funeral companies, very efficiently but somehow in a businesslike manner. In that situation, the very human and sacred activity of holding a funeral tends to be relinquished over to people who have never met or known the departed. During the funeral, everything is done smoothly and on schedule, and soon after the ceremony, the attendees quickly return to their everyday ordinariness as if nothing has happened.

This tendency makes us forget that death is a great reminder to learn about the impermanence of life. For this reason, we are losing our sense of the tremendous value and depth of our lives. By ignoring the fact of death, we ignore the miracle and mystery of life. In other words, to appreciate life, we need to appreciate death. A funeral is a golden opportunity for this kind of appreciation. In that sense, death is a wonderful and precious gift from the deceased to us, the living. But then how can we make the best use of this gift?

With this in mind, let us once more seriously consider this matter of funerals, and how we approach them in the present socio-historical context. I believe it is extremely important, particularly now.

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