Ritual/ Ceremony

A rite of passage is the name given to a ritual occasion that marks the passing from one stage of life to another. Religions mark important moments in life such as birth, marriage and death.

Birth

In some Buddhist countries, parents take their child to the temple for a naming ceremony. A monk sprinkles water on the baby and says a blessing for a happy life. A wax candle is lit and is allowed to drip down into a bowl of water. This is a symbol of the union of the elements: air, fire and water. It symbolises the harmony the child will achieve in its lifetime.

Marriage

There is no Buddhist marriage ceremony or wedding ritual. Wedding customs vary from country to country. In Thailand, for example, the wedding takes place in the family home. On the day of the wedding, the bride and groom bow before an image of the Buddha, light candles, and burn incense. Monks arrive, bless the home with holy water and read passages from holy scripture. The family give the monks a gift of food in the hope that it will bring happiness to the bride and groom. All the married people present bless the newly weds by placing a drop of water on their heads. Everyone is then presented with a flower. A festive meal is shared with family and friends in honour of the bride and groom.

Death

In Buddhism, death is not something to be feared, it is simply a step along the way toward Nirvana. When someone dies, the body is washed and laid in a coffin decorated with flowers. Family and friends carry the coffin in a procession to the temple. It is set down surrounded by offerings of flowers and food. Monks are usually present but they do not conduct a funeral rite. They may give a sermon on Buddhist teaching - explaining the way everything changes and nothing lasts, and how this is a cause of sorrow and suffering. Buddhists believe death is a release from suffering so it is a reason to celebrate. Mourners share a meal and show very little grief.

Buddhists may be buried or cremated when they die, according to the local custom. If a body is cremated the ashes are collected and scattered on the waters of a nearby lake or river.

Questions

1. What is:
   a. a ritual?
   b. a rite of passage?

2. What are the main rites of passage for Buddhists?

3. Select an important moment in the life of a Buddhist.
   a. What special actions or gestures mark the occasion?
   b. What special words are spoken?
   c. What special clothes are worn?

4. What deep, important things are expressed through Buddhist rituals on ONE of the following occasions?
   a. Birth.
   b. Marriage.
   c. Death.

5. Describe how Buddhist beliefs are evident in the rituals surrounding birth, marriage or death.