

What Happens After Death According to Buddhas and Zen Ancestors (and Zen Buddhist Ceremonies for the Dead Based on this Understanding)

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As Western Zen practitioners who have grown up in a Judeo-Christian, Scientific, and Agnostic culture, we may have consciously or unconsciously taken on such dominant cultural views about what happens after death. Of course none of us can know for sure what happens at that time until it happens to us, but it may be helpful to know what the buddhas and ancestors of our tradition taught about this most important transition for all sentient beings. Priests and senior practitioners especially might be asked by relatives and friends of the deceased what the Buddhist tradition teaches about what happens after death. We can always share our own personal ideas (which could be as simple as “how would I know?”), but if we want to share what our tradition teaches, it seems to be somewhat complex. Since I have not come across a summary of all the traditional teachings on this matter, I have put one together here, along with the ceremonies for the dead in the Zen tradition and how they could be understood to accord with these teachings. It may also be useful to see how the teachings about what happens after death can help to understand the overall structure of Buddha-Dharma and the differences between foundational Buddhism and great vehicle Buddhism.

Foundational Buddhism and the Theravada Tradition

In the foundational and Theravada teachings, there are two basic possibilities for what happens after death, depending on one’s intention, practice, and realization. In order of best-case to worst-case, they are:

1. A few highly developed Buddhist practitioners, who have deeply cultivated meditation and insight, can permanently cut the root of greed, hate, and delusion based on the false view of an independent self, realizing the highest goal of liberation (nirvana), becoming a “worthy one” (arhat). They will not be reborn in the six realms of illusory habit-driven discontent (samsara). Their moment-to-moment stream of consciousness (vijñana) carries no more results of past actions (karma) performed while holding the false view of an independent self, so it simply ceases (nirodha) at the time of death. Some practitioners have realized the next highest goal of “non-returner” (anagamin), and they will realize the final goal of worthy one after death and will not be reborn in the six realms. Those who have realized the lesser goals of “once-returner” (sakrdagamin) and “stream-enterer” (shrotapanna) will not be reborn in the three lower realms of animals, hungry spirits, and hell. None of these profound realizations, however, is becoming a fully awakened one (buddha), who can timelessly and eternally manifest illusory bodies in the six realms of samsara to benefit the sentient beings who live there.
2. Most people (and animals) after death will be reborn as a particular moment-to-moment stream of consciousness, carrying the results of actions (karma) from all previous lifetimes, in one of the six realms of illusory habit-driven discontent (samsara): gods (deva) dominated by pride, fighting gods (asura) dominated by jealousy, humans (manushya) dominated by attachment or doubt, animals (tiryagyoni) dominated by delusion or confusion, hungry spirits (preta) dominated by greed, or hell-dwellers (naraka) dominated by hate. The best realms of samsara in which to be born are the human realm where one can practice and realize the goal of “worthy one” so as not to be reborn again, or the god realm where life is comfortable and long. The Sarvastivada, Vaibhashika, and Sautrantika Schools (hinayana, or foundational vehicles) hold the view of an intermediate realm between lives (antarabhava, Tibetan bardo), lasting from 7 to 49 days, but the Theravada School does not. The intermediate realm “being” is sometimes called a scent-eater (gandharva), with a subtle non-material body that is nourished by scents such as incense. Some people think that the buddha’s teaching of no independent self (anatman) would not allow for rebirth, but there is actually no conflict. Even though we appear as and experience ourselves to be the same person, or self, as yesterday, there is no real continuous singular independent self—only the moment-to-moment arising and ceasing “stream” of impermanent body and mind (skandhas). At the moment of death, the “stream” of arising and ceasing body begins to disintegrate, and the “stream” of arising and ceasing consciousness (vijñana), interdependent with the results of past actions, separates from dependence on the previous body and finds a new embryo to embody or depend on. This consciousness is not an independent self, though it appears to be. If there was no rebirth, and consciousness completely ceased at death, this would mean everyone would realize the goal of worthy one simply by dying.

The Buddha's teachings on death and rebirth are found in many scriptures and commentaries including:

Metta Sutta, Sutta Nipata 1.8:

"...not holding to fixed views, endowed with insight, freed from sense appetites, one will not be born again into a womb."

Saleyyaka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 41 (translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi):

"Householders, it is by reason of unrighteous conduct, conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, that some beings here, on the breakup of the body, after death, are reborn in a state of misery, in a bad destination, in the lower world, in hell. It is by reason of righteous conduct, conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, that some beings here, on the breakup of the body, after death, are reborn in a good destination, in a heavenly world."

Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 38 (translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi):

(The monk Sati said), "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same (permanent) consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another." "What is that consciousness, Sati?" "Venerable sir, it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions." "Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness?... When there is the union of the mother and father, and the mother is in season (fertile), and the *gandhabba* (Sanskrit *gandharva*) is present, through the union of these three things the descent of the embryo takes place."

Kutuhalasala Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya 44.9 (translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu):

"I designate the rebirth of one who has sustenance, *Vaccha*, and not of one without sustenance. Just as a fire burns with sustenance and not without sustenance, even so I designate the rebirth of one who has sustenance and not of one without sustenance... *Vaccha*, when a flame is being swept on by the wind and goes a far distance, I designate it as wind-sustained, for the wind is its sustenance at that time... *Vaccha*, when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, I designate it as craving-sustained, for craving is its sustenance at that time."

Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha*, Chapter 3, "The World" (translated by Leo Pruden):

"Intermediate existence (*antarabhava*), which inserts itself between existence at death and existence at birth, not having arrived at the location where it should go, cannot be said to be born. Between death—that is, the five *skandhas* of the moment of death—and arising—that is, the five *skandhas* of the moment of rebirth—there is found an existence—a 'body' of five *skandhas*—that goes to the place of rebirth. This existence between two realms of rebirth (*gati*) is called intermediate existence... It is the Gandharva. We read in the Sutra, 'Three conditions are necessary for an embryo to descend, [in order for a son or daughter to be born]: the woman must be in good health and fertile, the pair must be united, and a Gandharva must be ready.' What is the Gandharva if not an intermediate being? But our opponents do not read the Sutra in these terms! They replace the third condition by a text that says, 'a dissolution of the *skandhas* [that is, one dying] must be made ready.'... How long does an intermediate being exist? There is no fixed rule, says the Bhadanta. It lasts as long as it does not encounter the coming together of the causes necessary for its rebirth. In fact an intermediate existence and the existence that follows are projected by the same action (*karma*) and form part of the same existence; it is for this reason that, when the life (or the vital organ, *jiyitendriya*) of an intermediate being comes to an end, there is no death. The Bhadanta Vasumitra says: 'An intermediate being lasts seven days. If the complex of causes necessary to reincarnation has not been realized, then the intermediate being dies and is reborn.' Other scholars say that it lasts seven weeks. The Vaibhashikas say: 'As it desires birth, it lasts only a short time and then its life is reincarnated. If the complex of external causes is not realized, then one of two things happens: either old actions are such that a birth should take place in such and such a place, and should be of such and such a nature, and, in this case, these actions cause the complex of causes to be realized; or rather this determination is absent, and, in this case, birth takes place in another place, and it is of another nature.'"

Great Vehicle Buddhism and the Zen Tradition (in China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Tibet)

In the great vehicle (mahayana) for awakening beings (bodhisattvas), there are more possibilities for what happens after death, depending on intention, practice, and realization. In order of best-case to worst-case, they are:

1. A few highly developed Buddhist practitioners, who have deeply cultivated meditation, insight, and compassion for all beings, can permanently and directly realize the emptiness of all phenomena (shunyata) or the awakened nature of mind (tathagatagarbha), entering the stages (bhumi) of the path of awakening beings (bodhisattvas), leading to the final goal of being a fully awakened one (buddha) for the benefit of all beings. Such practitioners can realize this final goal of complete perfect awakening (anuttara-samyak-sambodhi) just after death, when awareness (jnana) is very clear without the illusion of duality, or at any time in the intermediate realm (antarabhava, Tibetan bardo) which can last up to 49 days after death—before rebirth into one of the six realms. As an awakened one, they have three eternal bodies (trikaya): a reality body (dharmakaya) of formless empty awareness, a bliss body (sambhogakaya) that can generate a pure land or buddha-field (buddha-kshetra) to benefit awakening beings, and a manifestation body (nirmanakaya) such as Shakyamuni Buddha, that can appear in the six realms to benefit suffering beings.
2. Buddhist practitioners who have some direct experience of the emptiness of all phenomena or the awakened nature of mind, and have deep faith in an awakened one's pure land or buddha-field (buddha-kshetra) along with the strong intention to be “born” there, can do so just after death or at any time in the intermediate realm which can last up to 49 days after death. Pure lands are not part of the six realms of illusory habit-driven discontent (samsara), but are not the realm of complete perfect awakening either; they are the manifestation of perfect conditions for awakening beings (bodhisattvas) to realize complete awakening as quickly and easily as possible, for the benefit of all beings. In Japanese Buddhism, including the Zen tradition, one can practice in a pure land for up to 33 years (in human time) before becoming an awakened one (buddha). Pure lands are “created” by different buddhas' bliss bodies, and have different names such as Amitabha Buddha's western “Ultimate Bliss” (Sukhavati), Akshobhya Buddha's eastern “Joyous” (Abhirati), Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's “Brilliance” (Potalaka), Padmasambhava's “Copper-Colored Mountain,” Soto Zen's “Silent Light” and “Mind Only” Pure Lands.
3. A few highly developed Buddhist practitioners, who have deeply cultivated meditation, insight, and compassion for all beings, can permanently and directly realize the emptiness of all phenomena (shunyata) or the awakened nature of mind (tathagatagarbha), entering the stages (bhumi) of the path of awakening beings (bodhisattvas), leading to the final goal of being a fully awakened one (buddha) for the benefit of all beings. Awakening beings from the first stage (bhumi) onwards, having realized the emptiness of the six realms of illusory habit-driven discontent (samsara), can vow to be born again and again in these illusory realms (usually human) in order to liberate the suffering beings there from their belief that the six realms really exist.
4. Most people (and animals) after death will be “reborn”, as a particular moment-to-moment stream of consciousness carrying the results of actions (karma) from all previous lifetimes, in one of the six realms of illusory habit-driven discontent (samsara): gods (deva) dominated by pride, fighting gods (asura) dominated by jealousy, humans (manushya) dominated by attachment or doubt, animals (tiryagyoni) dominated by delusion, hungry spirits (preta) dominated by greed, hell-dwellers (naraka) dominated by hate. The best realm of samsara in which to be born is the human realm where one can practice and become an awakening being (bodhisattva) to help others to awaken. The Mahayana schools, based on Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha*, hold the view of an intermediate realm between lives (antarabhava), lasting from 7 to 49 days.
5. Some unfortunate people (and animals), due to the results of harmful actions (karma) from all previous lifetimes, especially those based on greed and hate, will be born in the lower realms—as an animal, hungry spirit, or hell-dweller—for one or more lifetimes. This unpleasant rebirth could happen at any time during the 49 days of the intermediate realm, and a lifetime in the hungry spirit or hell realms could last a very long time.

The Buddha's teachings on death, rebirth, the path of awakening beings, complete awakening and the three awakened bodies can be found in many great vehicle scriptures (mahayana sutras) including:

Large Prajna Paramita Sutra (translated by Edward Conze)

“Through their wholesome root (bodhisattvas) will seek rebirth in other Buddha-fields where they will come face to face with the Tathagatas demonstrating Dharma. And when they have heard from them just this perfection of wisdom, they will also in their Buddha-field instigate, encourage, and incite innumerable living beings to win supreme enlightenment... How then has a Bodhisattva who wants to fully know the supreme enlightenment, set out for the benefit of the world? Here the Bodhisattva liberates beings from the five places of rebirth, and places them on the shore where there is nothing to fear, into the safety of Nirvana.”

Samdhinirmochana Sutra, Chapter 10 (translated by John Powers)

“Bhagavan, if the Dharmakaya of Tathagatas is free from all manifest activity, in that case, how could there be mental factors in the absence of manifest activity? ‘Manjushri, this is due to the previous manifest activity of cultivating method and wisdom... Manjushri, the spheres of activity of Tathagatas are the completely pure Buddha fields, arrayed with limitless, inconceivable qualities common to all Tathagatas. The domains of Tathagatas are the five realms in all of their aspects: the realms of sentient beings, the worldly realms, the realms of phenomena, the realms of discipline, and the realms of the methods of discipline... Manjushri, (a Nirmanakaya comes forth from the Tathagata) due to intensely observing the Tathagatas, and also because Nirmanakaya are the blessings of the Tathagatas.”

Amitayus Buddha Sutra (translated by Hisao Inagaki)

“Again, Shariputra, all sentient beings born in the Land of Utmost Bliss (Sukhavati) dwell in the stage of non-retrogression. Many of them are in the stage of becoming a buddha after one more life. Their number is so great that it is beyond reckoning; it can only be described as innumerable, unlimited, and incalculable. Shariputra, those sentient beings who hear of that land should aspire to be born there. Why? Because they will be able to meet such sages of supreme virtue. Shariputra, one cannot attain birth in that land with few roots of good or a small store of merit. Shariputra, if a good man or woman who hears of Amitayus holds fast to his Name even for one day, two days, three, four, five, six, or seven days with a concentrated and undistracted mind, then, at the hour of death, Amitayus will appear with a host of holy ones. Consequently, when their life comes to an end, the aspirants' minds will not fall into confusion and so they will be born immediately in the Land of Utmost Bliss of Amitayus. Shariputra, perceiving these benefits, I say: All sentient beings who hear this teaching should aspire to birth in that land.”

Kshitigarbha Sutra, Chapter 7 “Benefiting the Living and Dead” (trans. by Buddhist Text Translation Society)

Earth Store Bodhisattva (Kshitigarbha, Jizo) said, “The bad habits of beings range from minor to major. Since all beings have such habits, their parents or relatives should create blessings for them when they are on the verge of dying in order to assist them on the road ahead. That may be done by hanging banners and canopies; lighting oil lamps; reciting the sacred Sutras; making offerings before the images of Buddhas or sages. Another way to assist them is by reciting the names of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Pratyekabuddhas so that the recitation of each name passes by the ear of the dying one and is heard in his fundamental consciousness. Suppose the evil karma created by beings were such that they should fall into the evil destinies. If their relatives cultivate wholesome causes on their behalf when they are close to death, then their manifold offenses can be dissolved. If relatives can further do many good deeds during the first forty-nine days after the death of such beings, then the deceased can leave the evil destinies forever, be born as humans and gods, and receive supremely wonderful bliss. The surviving relatives will also receive limitless benefits... If beings of the present and future when on the verge of dying hear the name of one Buddha, one Bodhisattva, or one Pratyekabuddha, they will attain liberation whether they have offenses or not. When men or women laden with offenses who failed to plant good causes die, even they can receive one-seventh of any merit dedicated to them by relatives who do good deeds on their behalf. The other six-sevenths of the merit will return to the living relatives who did the good deeds. It follows that men and women of the present and future who cultivate while they are strong and healthy will receive every portion of the benefit derived. The arrival of the Great Ghost of Impermanence is

so unexpected that the deceased ones' consciousnesses first roam in darkness and obscurity, unaware of offenses and blessings. For forty-nine days they are as if deluded or deaf, or as if in courts where their karmic retributions are being decided. Once judgment is fixed, rebirths are undergone according to their karma. In the time before rebirths are determined, the deceased suffer thousands of myriads of concerns. How much more is that the case for those who are to fall into the bad destinies. Throughout forty-nine days those whose lives have ended and who have not yet been reborn will be hoping every moment that their immediate relatives will earn blessings powerful enough to rescue them. At the end of that time the deceased will undergo retribution according to their karma. If someone is an offender, he may pass through hundreds of thousands of years without even a day's liberation. If someone's offenses deserve Fivefold Relentless Retribution, he will fall into the great hells and undergo incessant suffering throughout hundreds of thousands of eons. Moreover, when beings who have committed karmic offenses die, their relatives may prepare vegetarian offerings to aid them on their karmic paths... If purity is vigorously maintained in making the offering to the Buddhas and Sangha, the deceased will receive one-seventh of the merit. Therefore, by performing vegetarian offerings on behalf of deceased fathers, mothers, and other relatives while making earnest supplication on their behalf, beings of Jambudvipa benefit both the living and the dead.”

Ullambana Sutra (translated by the Buddhist Text Translation Society)

“Thus, using his Eye of the Way, Mahamaudgalyayana regarded the world and saw that his deceased mother had been born among the hungry ghosts... The Buddha said, ‘Your mother’s offenses are deep and firmly rooted. You alone do not have enough power. Although your filial cries move heaven and earth, the heavenly spirits, the earth spirits, twisted demons, and those outside the Way, Brahmans, and the four heavenly king gods, are also without sufficient strength. The awesome spiritual power of the assembled Sangha of the ten directions is necessary for liberation to be attained. I shall now speak the Dharma of rescue which causes all those in difficulty to leave worry and suffering, and to eradicate obstacles arisen from offenses. The fifteenth day of the seventh month is the Pravarana day (for asking forgiveness at the end of the three month rainy season retreat) for the assembled Sangha of the ten directions. For the sake of fathers and mothers of seven generations past, as well as for fathers and mothers of the present who are in distress, you should make an offering of clean basins full of hundreds of flavors and the five fruits, and other offerings of incense, oil, lamps, candles, beds and bedding, all the best of the world, to the greatly virtuous assembled Sangha of the ten directions... If one thus makes offerings to these Pravarana Sanghas, one’s present father and mother, parents of seven generations, as well as the six kinds of close relatives, will escape from the three paths of sufferings, and at that time attain release. Their clothing and food will spontaneously appear. If the parents are still alive, they will have wealth and blessings for a hundred years. Parents of seven generations will be born in the heavens. Transformationally born, they will independently enter the celestial flower light, and experience limitless bliss.’ At that time the Buddha commanded the assembled Sangha of the ten directions to recite mantras and vows for the sake of the donor’s family, for parents of seven generations.”

Eihei Dogen’s *Shobogenzo Doshin*, “Mind of the Way” (translated by Peter Levitt & Kazuaki Tanahashi)

“When you leave this life, and before you enter the next life, there is a place called an intermediary realm. You stay there for seven days. You should resolve to keep chanting the names of the three treasures without ceasing while you are there. After seven days you die in the intermediary realm and remain there for no more than seven days. At this time you can see and hear without hindrance, like having a celestial eye. Resolve to encourage yourself to keep chanting the names of the three treasures without ceasing: ‘I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha.’ After passing through the intermediary realm, when you approach your parents to be conceived, resolve to maintain authentic wisdom. Keep chanting refuge in the three treasures in your mother’s womb. Do not neglect chanting while you are given birth. Resolve deeply to dedicate yourself to chant and take refuge in the three treasures through the six sense roots. When your life ends, your eye sight will suddenly become dark. Know that this is the end of your life and be determined to chant, ‘I take refuge in the buddha.’ Then, all buddhas in the ten directions will show compassion to you. Even if due to conditions you are bound to an unwholesome realm, you will be able to be born in the deva realm or in the presence of the Buddha. Bow and listen to the Buddha.”

Zen Buddhist Ceremonies for the Dead (most of which originated in tenth-century China, before Dogen)

Funeral ceremonies performed by the living can help the intermediate realm being (stream of consciousness) to realize complete awakening, birth in a pure land, or at least rebirth in the upper realms of gods or humans. In Soto Zen, the funeral for laypeople begins with ordaining the deceased as a Zen priest (shukke tokudo)—receiving the bodhisattva precepts (jukai), initiation into awakening (abhisheka/kancho), and the blood lineage document (kechimyaku) as a blessed talisman. Then there are words of guidance and encouragement (insho) for the deceased, recitation of the ten names of buddha (nenju), and dedication of merit to adorn the deceased's place of destination (whatever it may be). Incense is offered as nourishment for the intermediate realm scent-eater (gandharva). Since nobody can know the destination of the deceased person's stream of consciousness, the living just encourage and assist it toward awakening. It is taught that the intermediate realm beings, and other non-physical beings such as hungry spirits, can "hear" speech, perceive thoughts and intentions, and meet the living in various ways imperceptible on the gross level, with their subtle immaterial bodies and sense faculties.

Memorial ceremonies are performed every 7 days after death, calling on different buddhas and bodhisattvas to help the deceased realize awakening or birth in a pure land, for each of the 7 weeks of the intermediate realm up to 49 days—when the intermediate being has either realized complete awakening, been born in a pure land, been born into one of the six realms as a bodhisattva, or been born into one of the (hopefully upper) six realms as an ordinary being. Annual memorials in Japan are traditionally performed up to 33 years, the maximum time (in human years) it takes for a bodhisattva in a pure land to realize complete awakening (buddha).

Ceremonies for feeding the hungry spirits (sejiki/segaki) are performed every evening in Zen monasteries, and a few times a year on a larger scale for any deceased who may have been born in the hungry spirit or hell realms, as well as for nature spirits and all one's deceased relatives (whether or not they are in the hungry spirit realm). This ceremony gives them nourishment, human food transformed and made edible through the powerful intention expressed by mantras and mudras, and encourages them to be born in a pure land and become awakened ones to benefit all beings. Hungry spirits look for nourishment particularly in the evening, and during the Ullambana (Obon) festival in mid-July or August. Ceremonies for liberating animals (hojo-e) are performed occasionally for freeing animals from being killed, but also to encourage them to be born in their next life in the pure land of Ratnashikin Buddha (as taught in the Golden Light Sutra), or at least in the upper realms.

Daily services in Zen temples involve making offerings, chanting, and dedication of the merit generated from these. Morning service is generally dedicated to awakened ones (buddhas), awakening beings (bodhisattvas) including Dharma protectors, and deceased Zen ancestors who have now become awakened ones or awakening beings in a pure land. In this case the intention is to make offerings to them out of gratitude and to ask for their assistance on *our* path to awakening. Evening service is generally dedicated to deceased relatives and friends, hungry spirits, and all ordinary sentient beings. In this case the intention is to make offerings to them to assist them on *their* path to awakening—they may be still in the intermediate realm, or have been born in one of the non-physical realms such as gods, hungry spirits, or hell, or be practicing in a pure land.

Memorial tablets (ihai) and gravesite markers (stupa/toba) with the deceased's name are a dwelling place in the human realm for the deceased person who has now potentially become an awakened reality body (dharmakaya buddha) or an awakening being (bodhisattva) in a pure land. Since the maximum time in a pure land before becoming a buddha is 33 years, memorial tablets can be burned after that time has passed—or kept as tablets for the new buddha, as is the case with those of Zen ancestors and teachers. There are also memorial tablets for the myriad hungry spirits, used as a place to offer food to hungry spirits. If the deceased was reborn as a human or animal, they would have a physical body and would not need a tablet as their physical dwelling place. Memorial tablets and gravesite markers are the location in the human realm for making offerings to non-physical beings—in the form of incense, flowers, light, water, food, and chanting—to assist them in their ongoing path to awakening, or to ask them as awakened ones to assist us in our path. A home buddha-altar (butsudan), especially if it holds memorial tablets, can be understood as a miniature representation of a pure land where the deceased ones now dwell. Of course non-physical beings are not limited to that particular dwelling place, but that is where humans can meet them, make offerings to them, or receive their blessings.