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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Summary

This article was written on “Father’s Day” 2020 by the Abbot of Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia, Anita Carter. The article teaches and explains the importance of honouring our Fathers and Ancestors.

There are quotes from various scholars, and examples of Buddhist and practices in remembering and honouring Ancestors from different cultures. This article also acknowledges the Ancestors of Buddhist Discussion Centre.

Thank You to Fathers and Ancestors

The 6th of September 2020 is Father’s Day.

Happy Father’s Day to all Fathers!

It is with joy that we celebrate the day and thank our Father’s for being our Father’s.

Usually, we recollect our life as a young person and remember all the times that our Father helped us.

We thank our Father for giving us this human body and mind.

We thank all our Ancestors for our Father.

Without our Ancestors, our Father would not be our Father and we would not be here.

Therefore, our Ancestors are most important when it comes to thinking of us as a human person.

It was Edmund Burke (1729-1797) who once wrote 'We have hardly any landmarks from the wisdom of our ancestors to guide us.'

Who were they, from where did they come and to where did they go to at death?

In his book 'To the Cemetery and Back - Dark Ages, Golden Ages', Leonard Price wrote the following words:

“In this city as in all, the dead are granted little space. Our business and pleasure take us past the old iron gates a hundred times on the way to seemingly more immediate destinations.

“But inside the cemetery, the earth is half-paved with stone remembrances and the middle air is full of obelisks and angels. Names and dates surround us, some sharp and raw, some worn nearly to oblivion, all crowding upon us with the particulars of spent lives - of this family, of this age, with these virtues, with this hope of heaven. What can this mean to us?

“We stroll on, reading chronicles of grief: beloved wife, infant aged three days, daughter, son, darling children. Generations are drawn from the world by the chain of mortality.

“Do these stones mark an ending or only a continuance?”

Leonard Price noted that:

“The mind runs endlessly in moments that flare and fizzle. There is a being born and dying with every one of them - a birth and death of every thought and every breath happening right here while we worriedly scan the horizon for a supposed Great Death”.

This cemetery, wrote Price, with its solid stones is only a mirror, into which the Buddha bids us look to the funeral procession within ourselves.

The Ancestors ceremony has become a tradition in many cultures, Vulcan in the Vietnamese culture, Ulambana in the Chinese culture and Bon Phcum Ben (Festival of All Souls) in the Cambodian culture.

It is important to remember your Ancestors – we like to do this regularly – maybe daily, or less so.

That is how important they are.

As a human it is our responsibility to share our merits with our Ancestors. We do this at the end of all our classes, we share our merits. As we share our merits with all our relatives, I recommend that we remember our Ancestors and share our merits with them wherever they may be.

The Cambodian Buddhist ceremony of Phcum Ben is based on the Buddhist Sutta entitled Tirokudda Sutta, which describes the miserable life of Pretas or Hungry Ghosts, inhabitants of the underworld kingdom or hell. The sutta reads:

“They came naked to the royal palace of King Bimbisara by night. Their languished plea for mercy and assistance resulting from hunger and thirst were heard by the King. He brought the news to the Buddha and asked him who were these creatures. The Buddha told him that they were pretas, and they were relatives of yours who came from the underworld looking for food. Food was offered to them to satisfy their needs”.

We will now read the **Tirokudda Sutta: Hungry shades outside the wall** (from www.accesstoinight.org) as translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

“When he was wandering along still a saint with no mission accomplished, King Bimbisara wanted him to make one promise: visit him first on the next visit to Rajagaha. The sage's next visit took five long years of hardship. The Buddha kept the promise when he was in hometown after nine months of enlightenment; King Bimbisara, for that matter, was topmost even above his one-time family.

“On the Buddha's second day at Rajagaha, the king's palace was experiencing great hue and cry from some apparitions. The apparitions were workers tasked with distributing alms to the Buddha and the retinue, eons ago. But they neglected their duty keeping some gifts for themselves.

“They suffered so long, for that reason, and became apparitions in Kassapa Buddha's period. Kassapa Buddha asked them to wait for Gauthama Buddha's time when King Bimbisara, their one-time relative, gathers merit for them by distributing alms to the Buddha. They waited so long and had to create a scene when King Bimbisara failed to fulfill what they require.

“The Buddha could see the plight in his divine eye and spelled it out to the king. The Buddha accepted the alms by the king and invoked blessings to the dead relatives reciting Tirokudda Sutta.

Here is the poetic translation into English by Ven. Thanissaro, an American Buddhist monk of the Thai forest kammattana tradition:

“Outside the walls they stand, and at crossroads.

“At door posts they stand,
returning to their old homes.
But when a meal with plentiful
food and drink is served,

no one remembers them:
Such is the Kamma of living beings.

“Thus, those who feel sympathy
for their dead relatives give timely
donations of proper food and drink
- exquisite and clean - thinking:
"May this be for our relatives.
May our relatives be happy!"

And those who have gathered there,
the assembled shades of the relatives,
with appreciation give their blessing
for the plentiful food and drink:
"May our relatives live long
because of whom we have gained (this gift).
We have been honored,
and the donors are not without reward!"

“For there (in their realm) there is
no farming,
no herding of cattle,
no commerce,
no trading with money.
They live on what is given here,
hungry shades
whose time here is done.

“As water raining on a hill
flows down to the valley,
even so does what is given here
benefit the dead.
As rivers full of water
fill the ocean full,
even so does what is given here
benefit the dead.

"He gave to me, she acted on my behalf,
they were my relatives,
companions, friends."
Offerings should be given for the dead
when one reflects thus
on things done in the past.
For no weeping,
no sorrowing
no other lamentation
benefits the dead
whose relatives persist in that way.
But when this offering is given,
well-placed in the Sangha,

it works for their long-term benefit
and they profit immediately.

In this way the proper duty
to relatives has been shown,
great honour has been done to the dead,
and monks have been given strength:
The merit you have acquired
Is not small.”

The book of Milinda Panha from the Tripitika mentions four kinds of Pretas.

1. Pretas who live on pus,
2. Pretas who are always hungry,
3. Pretas who are constantly on fire, and
4. Pretas whose lives depend on merits dedicated by living relatives.

This last group is commonly known as Paradattupajivipret. They are released by night once every year from the underworld and wander among the living beings in search of their living relatives. They curse their relatives if they fail to find them in seven different Temples by this time of year. The daily Buddhist chanting includes the following Pali stanza, which says that: "yadihine gathane kayaducaritena" which means that a part of the merit resulted from this ceremony is dedicated to the Paradattupajiviprets via the Buddhist Monks.

Who were those Ancestors, from where did they come and to where did they go to at death?

Such knowledge can be found out by persons who cultivate their minds.

By understanding at least a few of our own past lives and deaths before we were born human this life, we can learn the causes that brought us to this present condition and gain an insight into that of our ancestors.

Whatever birth they have come to, may they find peace.

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines “Ancestors” as, “A person more remote than a grandparent, from whom one is descended; A forefather; A source, A precursor. A person who proceeds another in the course of inheritance. An animal or other organism from which another has evolved.”

Throughout the forty-one years the Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd. has been an active learning Centre, many Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd ancestors have contributed to the growth and prosperity of the Centre.

For this reason, we give thanks to all those past ancestors who have helped the Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd to continually develop.

The Buddhist scriptures traditionally refer to the eighty-four thousand illusions (misunderstandings), or causes of sufferings, that plague all living creatures, and also to the eighty-four thousand Teachings of the Buddha designed to combat these illusions through understanding things as they really are.

Certain types of infrastructure work chosen by our ancestors makes it now possible for suitable conditions to continue to arise at our Centre for the ongoing teachings of Buddha Dhamma.

Our ancestors that practiced the Buddha's Teachings of the Ten Perfections, the Five Precepts and the Noble Eightfold Path made it possible for persons in the present to hear the Buddha Dhamma in a suitable location.

If as an animal you were killed by a human, and then took rebirth as a human, you would be unlikely to grow up trusting humans and would see nothing wrong with killing animals.

If you were a human killed by a human, and then took rebirth as a human, you would be unlikely to grow up trusting humans and may see nothing wrong with killing humans.

So, from the merit we have made here, may all the ancestors share with us the causes to be well and happy.

In most Theravada Temples they transfer merits to the departed. In Pali this chant is:

Idam me natinam hotu, Sukhita hontu natayo,
Idam me natinam hotu, Sukhita hontu natayo,
Idam me natinam hotu, Sukhita hontu natayo.

In English this chant reads;

Let this merit accrue to our relatives, and may they be happy!
Let this merit accrue to our relatives, and may they be happy!
Let this merit accrue to our relatives, and may they be happy!

May you be well and happy and free from harm.

Anita Carter