

5C Death and the Reclining Buddha

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The passing of the world's great religious leaders often becomes a transformative event that galvanizes their ultimate message for future followers. Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection, celebrated today by Christians at Easter, reinforces the nature of his sacrifice to die for others. Over half a millennium earlier, in what is now northern India and Nepal, the death of the Buddha represents an equally important but philosophically different perception of what dying, the "afterlife," and living means.

The Buddha's story describes the transformation of Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Shakyas kingdom, who rescinds his elite life to become a wandering ascetic focused on understanding the nature of existence and finding an escape from suffering (*dukkha*) and the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). His teachings, initially passed on orally by monks and centuries later recorded in Buddhist texts, focus on several key events during the Buddha's life: his enlightenment, where he finally grasped the means to escape *samsara* at Bodhgaya; his first sermon, where he shared his teachings (*dharma*) at Sarnath; and finally, his death (*parinirvana*) at Kushinagar. Unlike Jesus, who died violently on the cross at the hands of the Romans, the Buddha passed peacefully in a cave after eating a meal of tainted pork or mushrooms at the age of 80. The record of his death captured in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* explains how the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodhgaya allowed him to follow the Noble Eightfold Path in this last life and escape the cycle of rebirth and suffering (Figure 5.7).

The Buddha's final death addressed a fundamental philosophical issue in ancient South Asia. Unlike reincarnation, Buddhists recognized that there is no individual soul (*atman*) and rebirth is merely a transmission of essences between lives (Becker 1993). An apt analogy is to see life as like passing a flame from one candle to the next. The ultimate goal is to extinguish the flame that connects these essences to the physical world and enter into the state of *nirvana*, or nothingness. While later branches of Buddhism evolving in East Asia focus on entering into "heavens," they are not the same as the Western view where one's "self" ends up after living a good and proper life on Earth.

The Buddha's ultimate passing had spiritual and physical impacts across South Asia. His cremated remains were initially divided into eight parts and interred within stupas, mound-shaped monuments which became important pilgrimage sites for those who wished to be in his "presence." Centuries later these remains were unearthed and divided among thousands of sites throughout India and were ultimately disseminated across Asia. A replica of one of the most famous Buddha relics interred in the Temple of the Tooth at Kandy, Sri Lanka, is still annually paraded on the back of an elephant during

the Esala Perahera festival to commemorate the arrival of Buddhism to the island nation. While using his corporeal remains appears to stand in direct contrast to the idea of "nothingness" and lack of self, it shows how the Buddha's death continued to breathe life into his faith and spread the word of the *dharma*.

Images of the Buddha himself did not appear—for philosophical reasons—until several centuries after he walked the earth (DeCaroli 2015). The typical form of Buddha is very familiar to anyone who has visited an Asian art exhibit: meditative, seated figures with hands in various gestures (*mudras*) that represent important events in his journey. While the meaning of each hand position is often lost to the casual observer who lacks a deeper understanding of the religion, the image of his death—known as the reclining Buddha—is much more easily recognizable: a robed man, eyes peacefully closed, lying on his right side with his right arm underneath his head and his left stretched out along the top of his body. Examples of this motif commonly appear in carved reliefs and paintings, but is it the creation of colossal statues that signifies the importance of this event. A 14-meter/46-foot-long image made from brick recently dated to the third century CE at Bhamala in Pakistan represents the earliest known example of such larger-than-life representations (Hameed, Samad, and Kenoyer 2020). Colossal reclining Buddhas literally grew in popularity and size as the religion spread eastward within Asia. *Parinirvana* imagery was widespread in China by the fifth century but reached new artistic heights and meaning in the seventh century at the Mogao Caves near the famous Dunhuang monastery (Lee 2010). The numerous reclining Buddhas were carved directly from the rock inside individual caves—the largest of which spanned 17 meters/56 feet in length—to recreate both the event and the space where the Buddha died. In fifteenth-century Cambodia, the Khmer remodeled the entire western façade of their eleventh-century Hindu Baphuon temple to create a 70-meter/230-foot-long reclining Buddha. This act seems to mark the state's official transition to Theravada Buddhism as its sole religion and shows the relationship with spirituality and politics in the past (Leroy et al. 2015).

Reverence for the *parinirvana* image continues today and is most stunningly found in Jiangxi Province, eastern China. Carved directly into the mountain, this *parinirvana* image measures 416 meters/1365 feet long and 68 meters/223 feet high and represents the single largest image ever created of the Buddha's passing. The reclining Buddha displayed in this exhibit lies in stark contrast to the massive examples created throughout Asia's rich history. Hand-crafted by a local Cambodian artist, this small stone image represents a long tradition of capturing this important moment and, like

Buddhism, is available to anyone who wishes to obtain it. In the home of a Buddhist, it could sit in a small shrine, head oriented to the north, facing the direction of the setting sun. In the home of a tourist it may be placed on a shelf as a souvenir that is enjoyed for its peace and tranquility. In both cases, it acts as a remembrance of an important journey into the unknown. Like the Christian cross, the *parinirvana* image symbolizes both the end of a spiritual leader's path and a reminder of all that was accomplished to reach that point. In this way death is not the end but provides an essential way of understanding how to live.

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However, as adherents of religions of justice and mercy, both Christians and Jews hold that repentance is crucial as people live while dying. This is a time that includes ritual practices, prayers, self-examination, and confession of one's sins. Christians begin the yearly Lenten season of 40 days with the imposition of ashes in the shape of a cross while the priest or pastor says, "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return." One is to live in the Lenten season with a constant sense of one's vulnerability, fault, and mortality. For Jews, God, who is merciful, offers people the chance to consider the wrong they have done and repent. This takes place yearly during the Days of Awe, a ten-day period between the Rosh Hashanah (marking the creation of the world) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Again, living while dying is hardly just a physical process; it is a moral and spiritual journey.

Dying and the Dead

To understand human life as a moral and spiritual journey with the reality of death in view means that Jews and Christians also have beliefs and practices about dying and the dead. The mention before of the sacraments of Extreme Union and Last Rites clarifies how Catholic and Orthodox Christians treat the dying. Yet, in fact, funerary customs and commemorations of the dead differ among cultures within the Catholic or any other Christian communion: the Day of the Dead in Mexico (see Amat in this volume), All Hollow's Eve and All Saints Day worldwide. Nevertheless, death is set within the sacramental life of every Christian church because of *eucharistic* celebration of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection and, therefore, new life over the sting of death. So too in most churches, one trusts and believes that believers will be part of

the cloud of witnesses in life eternal (Heb. 12:1). As noted before, this takes place through baptism into new life of the Church, participation in worship and the Lord's Supper, faith in Christ as the savior, and a life of love and service. The cloud of witnesses, not only one's loved ones, are to aid the Church in times of travail.

During the late Middle Ages in the West, there appeared two texts called the *Ars Moriendi* (The Art of Dying). These gave practical instruction to people on how rightly to prepare for a good death and the experience of dying, as well as aid for those attending to the dying. This began a series of works by important thinkers, such as Erasmus and Luther, and reached an artistic peak with Jeremy Taylor's two volumes *The Rules and Exercise of Holy Living* (1650) and *The Rules and Instruction for Holy Dying* (1651). This tradition of reflection was meant to guide the dying person, to provide consolation, and to face threats to their conscience because of lack of faith, despair, or spiritual pride. The tradition also details prayers for the dying and other instructions for those helping the dying person. While contemporary society has a highly medicalized view of death and dying and often removes the dying from intimate contact with home and family, this Christian tradition understood dying and death itself as moral and spiritual realities. The tradition of *Ars Moriendi*, in its various forms, was meant to aid the dying in their final journey from this life to the next.

Among Jews, there are also rituals and practices that surround death and support the dying. Most importantly, the dying person should not be left alone but surrounded by family and others. There must be time and support for a confession of sin,

and time to reconcile with those from whom the dying person is, for whatever reason, estranged. Since God is merciful, it is never too late to return to God. Further, the last words of the dying persons should be the central statement of Jewish faith, the Shema: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One (Deut. 6:4). When death does come, there are practices of mourning that last a year and include *shiva*. “Sitting *shiva*” is a term used to describe the action of Jewish mourners. During the seven-day period of *shiva*, mourners receive condolences and sometimes sit on stools or boxes as a sign that the mourner has been “brought low” at the death of the loved one. With the death of a parent, the “Mourner’s Prayer,” or Kiddish, is recited collectively so that no mourner is alone, and it is also an affirmation of Jewish life and faith.

Because of the central affirmation of life as well as human dignity by Jews and Christians, it is hardly surprising that each tradition has long, complex debates and competing reflections on many topics related to death: abortion, justified war and killing, suicide (assisted or not), euthanasia (passive and active), and capital punishment. It is not possible to engage all these debates other than to note the basic affirmation of the goodness of life even with the realities of death, sin, and evil and thus a bias against unjustified killing, flowing from the command “Thou shall not kill” (Exod. 20:13) and works of love and good deeds for others.

Mention of the cloud of witnesses identifies a common trait among Jews and Christians, that is, the idea of martyrdom. A martyr is a witness for their religious conviction, the God of the Jews and the Triune God of Christian faith. In Judaism *kaddosh* means “[a] holy [one],” and there are many examples in the Hebrew Scripture as well as throughout Jewish history. The six million Jews who died during the Shoah, the Holocaust, under Nazi terror are the *kedoshim*. Likewise, Christians in the early Church died under the directions of Roman emperors and even now face persecution around the world. Jews have suffered throughout the centuries, from the Spanish Inquisition and other times and places to this day. Each tradition has specific directions for determining martyrdom. More importantly, the reality of martyrdom sheds light on Christian and Jewish ideas about death, namely, the physical death is not the greatest threat a human being faces, but, rather, the betrayal of the religious community and the denial of the God from whom one receives spiritual and physical life. Again, human life is understood to be a spiritual and moral journey in company with and for others to manifest love and, for Jews, to mend the world.

Beyond Death

As previously noted, Jews and Christians believe in a Messiah, albeit differently, and thus the ultimate triumph of God over forces that oppose and thwart the divine rule, including human sin and evil. They also believe in an afterlife, variously conceived. Christians hope for eternal life with God in “Heaven,” conceived in different ways. For much of Christian history, the Church taught “extra ecclesia nulla salvus,” that is, outside of the Church there is no salvation. Even today some Christian churches around the world engage in missionary work to save the souls of nonbelievers. Conversely, there are many contemporary Christians and churches who believe in universal salvation, holding that God’s love is for everyone. St. Augustine, one of the major early Christian thinkers who influenced much of Western Christian thought, taught that God’s punishment for sinners was to allow them to continue in what they love, that is, their sin that cuts them off from divine love and others in which true human felicity is to be found.

The idea of the afterlife in traditional Christian and Jewish thought and practice also meant that one could be eternally cut off from the divine, the source and ground of life. Called the Second or Eternal Death, these are “souls” forever separated from the divine and often related to punishment, the Lake of Fire, in the Book of Revelation, or more generally “Hell.” In the Jewish Bible there is no mention of Hell, but just *She’ol*, a shadowy place, the Pit, where souls await judgment. Analogous ideas are found in other religions. The Egyptian Book of the Dead details how the heart of the dead will be weighed on a scale against Maat, the personification of truth and world order, by Thoth, the ibis-headed recorder of the gods. If the heart balances with Maat, the person will be admitted to the afterlife, if not it is devoured by a terrifying creature. Hindus hold that until one is enlightened in seeing that *atman* and *brahman* are one a person is condemned to a cycle of rebirths, commensurate with one’s spiritual goodness, until enlightenment is achieved. In Buddhism there is no eternal heaven or eternal hell and no God who decides reward and punishment (see Hendrickson in this volume). Nevertheless, they do hold that greed, anger, and ignorance are the causes of human evil that stop people from reaching enlightenment. Beings are thereby born into heaven or hell, as conditions of life, according to their *karma*, that is, the good or evil deeds. Here too one sees, across vastly different religious traditions, that death is not only a physical fact but is linked to the spiritual and moral condition of human beings. In this way, the religions proclaim the victory of good over evil, of enlightenment over illusion and suffering, of heaven over hell.





Figure 5.9. Skeleton figure from Capula, Mexico (FM 343421).

5D Day of the Dead

Álvaro Amat

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

I am a Mexican immigrant and practicing orthodox Catholic. I celebrate many things at the same time on the Day of the Dead (Sayer 1994). But my mom, who was raised in Spain with Cuban ancestry, had her own personal reasons to dislike the Day of the Dead. For her, the Day of the Dead was a dark and disturbing tradition. Therefore, we did not follow any of the practices as a family. In a way, I grew up as an external observer who longed to join those traditions in any meaningful way, happy when any of my friends allowed me to be part of their family celebrations. I remember vividly the sugar skulls, or *calaveras* (Mack and Williams 2015), with my friends' names on them and I remember the hope that one day I would have my own sugar *calavera* with my name on it.

When I was very young, the images of *calaveras* and *calacas* (skeletons) scared me, and during the holidays of Día de Muertos in Mexico, *calaveras* are everywhere. Images in printed and TV advertising appropriating or imitating the art of José Guadalupe Posada, creator of famous images like *La Catrina*, would flood streets and homes. Decorated *calaveras* would emerge, populating the shelves and tables of markets and stores of traditional folk art. I was particularly disturbed by the figures of skeletons or *calacas* performing everyday activities (Figures 5.8–5.12). To cope with my fear, I used to run around the house with my fingers pulling my mouth horizontally to show my teeth like a *calavera*. This scared my younger siblings, and we would all end up running around the house, laughing and scaring each other, playing *calaveras*. In a way, we were doing what Day of the Dead accomplishes: sharing the fear and mocking death to make it part of life. I eventually got used to the *calavera* as ubiquitous in the Mexican cultural and artistic landscape. As a young aspiring artist, I greatly enjoyed visiting archaeological sites and the Museo Nacional de Antropología to appreciate the mastery of the great Mesoamerican artists and their geometrically stylized representations of skeletons, *calacas* and *calaveras*. From my art professors in high school and college, I learned to appreciate the art of José Guadalupe Posada and became an admirer of Mexican and popular graphic arts, appreciating the creative representation of human skeletons and skulls for social critique and dark humor.

Many of my friends had *ofrendas* at home and visited their relatives' graves to clean them, bringing flowers and making *ofrendas*. In school, each year we created big collective *ofrendas* dedicated to some famous person, usually someone who had a big impact in our culture who had died recently. Most of the time this would be a Mexican celebrity or artist, but sometimes the passing of an international figure would take over, for example in the year John Lennon was killed we created Beatles-inspired *ofrenda*. But at home we didn't have *ofrendas*, or at least that's what my mom thought. When my dad passed away, and not knowing that my mom did not follow any of Day of

the Dead traditions, some of my dad's friends used to bring home some of his favorite cigarettes, food, and beverages to the house, hoping that we could place them in their name on an *ofrenda* dedicated to him. My siblings and I, in collusion with the maid, secretly placed these items with some of his things (his pen, his watch, his lighter) hidden near his photo on the entrance table, with some flowers placed nearby elegantly, so my mom would not identify this arrangement as an "ofrenda."

For me it is hard to distinguish where the Catholic feast begins and where the pre-Columbian tradition ends. The three-day celebration/veneration of the dead includes prayer, two masses, a visit to the cemetery, *ofrendas*, *calaveritas*, *Pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), *cempasuchil* flowers (Mexican Marigolds), costumes, and *fiestas*. These three days are all enveloped in the unique beauty of the Day of the Dead and the solemnity of the Catholic religion. However, secularized celebrations like Halloween have also jumped into the mix with the intensely spiritual practices of our pre-Columbian and Catholic legacy. For me, it all comes together in a seamless celebration. I saw Halloween invade Mexico as it penetrated our culture. I used to visit rural Estado de México, bordering Morelia, during Halloween and the Day of the Dead holidays, which had become a strange week-long celebration. People would go "trick-or-treating" for three or more consecutive nights, singing "Queremos jalagüi" (We want Halloween) as well as "Me da para mi calaverita?" (Do you give me [something] for my little [sugar] skull?). It was a continuous procession of kids wearing homemade costumes of Superman and Spiderman with rubber masks of the current president on top, escorted by adults wearing traditional Mazahua attire, and carrying large plastic *calaveras* as baskets for candy, money, or used as lanterns.

Now that I live in the USA, Halloween has become more important because of my Americanized children, but also because I am fascinated by cultural cross-pollination. Halloween invaded Mexico, but the Day of the Dead invaded Halloween in return; for example, the way in which *Catrin*as have been integrated into the repertoire of American Halloween costumes, or like that James Bond movie that portrayed a fictional Day of the Dead parade with giant *calaveras*. Those parades didn't exist when I was growing up in Mexico, but now they have emerged as part of Day of the Dead celebrations all over Mexico. The invasion goes both ways, back and forth.

As an immigrant and as a father, Day of the Dead has gained significance and meaning. I still celebrate both the religious feasts and the cultural traditions together. I don't see any conflict or separation between them. On All Souls Day (*Día de los fieles difuntos*) on November 2 we commemorate the souls of the departed that are in purgatory for their purification. That night I