



What does the future hold for funerals in Japan?

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Interest in “death in the first person”

Shimada Hiromi: In January this year, I published *Zero-so: Assari shinu* (Zero funeral: How to die a simple death). It advocates “zero funerals,” whereby the crematorium disposes of the deceased’s remains in their entirety, leaving nothing for the bereaved family to collect. This means that there is no need for the family to pay for a grave either. In actual fact, the funeral urns that bereaved families go to collect in western Japan only contain around one third of the deceased’s total remains. The remainder is disposed of elsewhere, by the crematorium for instance. From a logical standpoint, it would make sense to get the crematorium to dispose of everything. I have been known to criticize modern funerals in the past, saying that they are an unnecessary and expensive formality, but the reaction to this book has been incredible. People seem to be thinking more and more about how they should end their days. Over the course of this discussion, I’d like us to think about what funerals and graves will be like in the future.

Murakami Kokyo: Despite researching subjects such as funeral rituals, and life and death, I am also a Buddhist monk. I’d like to think about modern-day funerals from both perspectives, so allow me to suggest a starting point. The French philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch divided death into three categories; “death in the first person,” “death in the second person” and “death in the third person.” These refer to your own death, the death of a loved one and the death of a stranger. If we’re going to discuss the issue of funerals, I think that is an excellent reference point.

In the past, people tended to regard funerals in the context of death in the second person, in terms of how members of their family should be laid to rest. Around 1990, that started to change as people became more interested in death in the first person, in terms of how they themselves should be laid to rest. The Soso Japan Society, of which you yourself are currently Chairman, engages in activities such as scattering people’s remains at sea or in the mountains, for example. It was around that same time that such activities became more common.

Shimada: The term “*shukatsu*” (preparing for death) has become widespread these days. I think that’s because people want to decide for themselves how they end their days.



Murakami: When you go to a wedding, you sometimes get treated to a slideshow of how the happy couple got together. These days, you see things like that being exhibited as extras at trade fairs for funeral directors. If people assume that funerals are for the benefit of the person who has died, then they need a way for the funeral to reflect that person's life. That seems to be what is happening.

Shimada: At the start of this year, Hamano Yasuki, a media expert who I was good friends with when we used to work together at the same research facility, passed away. He was just two years older than me. His funeral was a non-religious ceremony at a temple hall in the city. They played a slideshow looking back at his life. It was even broadcast online. Things have really changed. There are so many different types of funerals available these days.

Murakami: Funerals obviously serve a purpose in terms of grief, by easing the pain of the bereaved, but that doesn't take away from the sense of "death in the second person." The popularity of the song "A Thousand Winds" (based on the poem "Do not Stand at My Grave and Weep") is also down to the fact that Japanese people no longer have a clear image of what happens after death, choosing to accept the death of a loved one through that song instead.

At the same time however, the number of people thinking about funerals in terms of "death in the first person" is definitely on the increase. If you look back at the history of funerals during the postwar era, the first turning point came during the economic boom years. Prior to that point, funerals were a question of inheritance. There was a sense that, when a son lays his father to rest, he became a man. In rural communities in particular, individual families had to stand in line with regard to water rights, for instance, or communal land. This meant that funerals also served as ceremonies to mark the passing of rights from the head of the family to the next generation. Funerals certainly weren't for the individual who had passed away; they were for the entire community. As people began to move to the city during the boom years however, individual families became "independent" from their village communities, so funerals became family affairs.

Another turning point came in the 1990s. As mentioned in another discussion in this special feature, the emergence of the nuclear family meant that more elderly people began living on their own. Some even started to say that they didn't want to inconvenience their children when it came to their funeral. As a result, funerals started to become individual ceremonies rather than family affairs.

Shimada: We once conducted a survey in a mountain village. The village was made up of just one community, within which individual families had established a single order. Rather than merely being a group of families, it was an economic community that supported those who lived there. Children were born, then grandchildren, and households were passed down from one generation to the next.



Families aren't like that in the city however. Men and women get married, then their children fly the nest. In the end, the couple are left behind, with fifty years or so left to live. Families appear on the surface like foam, and disappear in much the same way. No matter what you say, there's just no way for people like that to have a firm image of what a family should be.

Murakami: People like that are probably in the majority. Originally, the main reason to keep on living was to preserve your family home, in honor of your ancestors. That's tricky if you don't have a family home. As relationships are formed vertically, you need an economic foundation to underpin it all. In that sense, I wonder if the only ones who will cling to conventional funerals to the bitter end might be family businesses. A funeral is also a social and economic manifestation in some respects.

Shimada: That sense of a funeral being an occasion to show off your family to other people has more or less gone from our society these days. If anything most people live to old age these days. By the time they reach their 80s or 90s, it's been 20 or 30 years since they retired. They no longer have enough human relationships to put on a big show like that. Once you reach that point, it makes little difference whether you have a funeral or not. That's probably why we are seeing a rapid increase in "*chokuso*" (direct funerals), where the body is cremated without any ceremony, in cities such as Tokyo.

It's getting harder and harder to think in terms of families and honoring your ancestors. That's where the issue of graves come in, as a key element of "zero funerals." Essentially, graves as we know them these days rely on there being a family behind them. If you don't have a family, then you can't expect your grave to be tended indefinitely. People don't have children, so there is nobody to pass their family grave on to. That is becoming an increasingly common issue.

Murakami: The legal framework behind the "one family one grave" system isn't actually that old. It was only introduced under the Meiji Civil Code (1898). I suppose it's something you could say about culture in general, but whatever starts at the top inevitably flows down until it's at the bottom. The common people began to do the same as the existing warrior class, and that's when the family grave system came into being.

Shimada: Essentially, by making the choice to not have a grave, people are merely reverting to how things used to be before that point.

Communal Burial Sites in the Edo Period

Murakami: Something I find fascinating is what happened with graves during the Edo period (1603–1868). Problems during the latter half of the eighteenth century, including the eruption of



Mount Asama and frost damage, led to farmers abandoning their fields and relocating to other areas. Once people were no longer able to meet obligations to their communities, such as contributing to local festivals, they moved to Edo (Tokyo) so that they could make a living. A significant percentage of these people, who were said to number around 20,000 every year, died in Edo without starting a family. People like that were simply buried in a coffin, in a communal grave on the grounds of a local temple. Over time, other coffins would be buried in the same place.

Shimada: Almost like a communal dump for bodies.

Murakami: As part of traditional rites, deceased families would sometimes be buried together in a single grave in the village burial site, marked with the inscription “*banrei kuyo no to*” (erected for the benefit of all).

Shimada: In some respects, you could say that the old method made more sense. But what about the idea of ending one’s life without having a grave, as in the case of “zero funerals”? Some have rejected the idea on the basis that Japanese people would be psychologically reluctant to have a crematorium dispose of someone’s remains in their entirety, because we feel an inherent attachment to people’s remains. Personally, I don’t think there are any grounds to support claims like that. People often cite the fact that the military worked hard to collect the remains of fallen soldiers on the southern frontline during the Pacific War. In reality however, the U.S. military do the same thing.

Furthermore, burial was the more common practice up until the Edo period. There was also a dual grave system whereby there would be a burial grave where the person’s body was actually buried, and a separate ceremonial grave for people to pay their respects. That suggests that people were never overly attached to physical remains.

Murakami: In the last couple of years, so-called natural funerals have started to become more popular. Once people’s remains have been buried however, trees grow and form woodland on top, so there has to be a separate location for people to pay their respects. As a mechanism, it is similar to the dual grave system.

Shimada: Recently, the anatomist Yoro Takeshi published a book on graves in Europe, called “*Shintai junrei*” (pilgrimage of the body). Having read the book, it seems that people’s remains are buried in large quantities in locations such as underneath churches. In the Christian faith, there is also something called “hagiolatry” (worship of saints), which led to the remains of saints being incorporated into the faith itself. It seems that European people are far more attached to people’s remains. If Japanese people do have a sense of attachment to people’s remains, then in reality, it’s



surely a case of worshiping people's bones, because that is all that remains after being cremated. As part of the bone-lifting ceremony after cremation, it is supposedly important to pick out the Adam's apple (actually a cervical vertebrae). Even that is relatively new however. Even if you regard it as something absolute, the origins of that practice are surprisingly recent.

Murakami: During the Meiji period (1868–1912), the only way to bury someone's remains in the central part of Tokyo, or *Shubiki* as the area used to be known, was to bury their cremated bones. Due in part to the anti-Buddhism movement, an order temporarily banning cremation was actually issued in 1873, on the basis that cremation is a Buddhist practice. As burial requires large areas of land for cemeteries however, the policy was quickly revised. If we do have some sort of attachment to people's bones, then this is thought to be the first legal basis for that.

Naturally, there are areas that attach some sort of religious meaning to people's bones. I suppose you could call that a form of "faith" in bones. People have different views on funerals, and different outlooks on life, from one region, or family, to the next. It would be impossible to give a definitive answer for Japan as a whole. There are people who genuinely believe in certain things, even if they are based on a flimsy premise. You could say that we ought to respect their beliefs.

Growing Further Away from Our Ancestors

Shimada: Despite saying that we're fine without graves, I also feel that graves perform a certain function, in their own way. There was something of a "grave boom" in the 1980s as lots more graves began to appear in the suburbs. Motorization was another key factor, in that people could just hop in their car when they wanted to visit the grave of a loved one. Since then, visiting graves has become an opportunity for people to meet up with siblings or relatives that they don't see very often. If we didn't have graves, people wouldn't go to the effort of meeting up like that. I wonder if people feel instinctively that they need to have graves so that people have somewhere to meet up. Maybe graves are the only way to guarantee that surviving family members will keep in touch. Although that's not really a concern once you're dead.

Murakami: It is thought that the rate of religious activity, including visiting shrines and temples, tends to increase as people get older. Visiting graves is the one exception however, because young people frequently do it too. Even amongst people as young as 20, around 85% are thought to visit graves to pay their respects. Getting together with a group of people who share the same ancestors and doing some sort of religious act has become an ancestral ritual. Even if visiting a family grave has become entirely trivialized, you can still call it an "ancestral ritual."



Shimada: I suppose so. Personally, I have never felt any real sense of being part of a larger family, or the associated attachment to my hometown. My grandparents were all from rural areas, but my parents and I were born in Tokyo. We lived in the house where my parents built, but only until I was around 7 years old. I don't know if you could call that a family home. If I want to feel like I'm going back home, I'll stay in a hotel in the city. I know that means I'm going out, but it's different from the house where I live day-to-day. I'm also in familiar surroundings, because it's still Tokyo. I find myself wondering, "is this what it's like to go back to your hometown?" – but I don't really know the answer to that question. I have grandchildren, but in this day and age, there is a real possibility that my relationship with them could be severed if their parents get divorced. It's hard to know what constitutes a family anymore.

Until fairly recently, you used to see psychics on TV saying things like "if bad things happen to you, it's because you're being cursed for not respecting your ancestors." You don't see that so much anymore, so I suppose that shows how we are becoming less receptive to the spirits of our ancestors.

Murakami: Although people in general are interested in the spiritual side of things, as evidenced by the popularity of so-called power spots, I wonder if they are becoming less sensitive to things like their ancestors, which feel very distant. In the field of funeral research, the movement known as "memorialism" or "reminiscence" is thought to have emerged around 1980. This revolves around remembering friends and close acquaintances, people whose faces you know, rather than worshiping ancestors who you have never seen.

Shimada: The central axis that has always formed the basis of our faith seems to have become a lot harder to understand.

Finding Your Own "Place"

Murakami: In any event, from the point of view of "death in the first person," there are questions over whether it is possible for people in the modern world to die in the knowledge that they have "found their own place." As we have been saying, we can no longer return to the days when our ancestors handed over the family to the next generation, when the deceased had a definite place in the family. When people prepare for their own death, or write down important notes for posterity, they're basically just trying to do something off their own backs.

Shimada: Maybe the way in which we live our lives has simply changed too much.

Murakami: *La Maison en Petits Cubes*, the Oscar-winning animated short film directed by Kato



Kunio, resonates a great deal with this subject. The film is set in a town that is being steadily flooded by rising sea levels. An old man who lives on his own keeps adding levels to his existing home, almost like building blocks. One day, he drops his favorite pipe, so he puts on diving gear and goes down into the water. Down below, he sees his old home, the backdrop to key events in his life, including looking after his wife before she died, his daughter bringing her boyfriend home, and his daughter being born. He feels deeply moved as he remembers the past, and decides to live out the rest of his days there.

The house has essentially become a collection of memories that he has built up over his life. He has found his own place. You could say that the house itself has become somewhat like the man's grave.

Shimada: When you start thinking about death like that, it's fine to rely on Buddhism if that works for you, but I just feel there's something missing. When organizing a funeral for someone who has moved to Tokyo from a rural area, the relatives find themselves wondering "what religion are we again?" They get a priest that they've never seen or spoken to before to perform some sort of funeral ceremony. They make an offering, and that's the end of it. When it comes to marking the first anniversary of the person's death, they don't call the priest again. We only have a meal with our relatives. That sort of thing is probably quite common.

Murakami: Actually, there are still families that form relationships with temples as a result of funerals, even in Tokyo. Statistics don't show any fall-off in the number of families with ties to temples in Tokyo.

Shimada: Even if they maintain a relationship with a temple however, people tend to stop bothering when it comes to the second anniversary, or the sixth. In other cities, such as Osaka, relationships with temples still seem to be fairly common. In Tokyo however, any sense of reality underpinning Buddhist funerals has been eroded almost entirely, to the point where people question "what is this service for?" Take the sort of urban missionary activities based on "New Buddhism" advocated by the Nichiren sect for example. They could be regarded as part of the movement to persuade people coming to the city from rural areas to pray to Buddhist altars. Things like that however have never really been part of traditional Buddhism. That makes it extremely difficult for us to connect with Buddhism as a result.

Murakami: Holding services to commemorate the anniversary of someone's death is based on belief in the Thirteen Buddhas, whereby various Buddhas change form into divine magistrates and appear before the dead on the anniversary of their death. This is also an opportunity for the bereaved to take a fresh look at their relationship with the deceased. Traditional Buddhist teachings state that there is



a “self” that is entirely separate from others. Contemplating that your self will cease to exist is thought to be the beginning of the “suffering of death.” It is important to understand the principle that your self lives within the context of ties to all living things, not just your own blood relatives.

Having said that, I personally don’t believe that practices such as “direct funerals” or failing to observe the anniversary of someone’s death necessarily go against the teachings of Buddhism.

“The four sufferings and the eight sufferings” referenced in Buddhism include things like the suffering of death, and the suffering of being separated from someone you love. As this suggests, the question of how to deal with sufferings such as these is actually an inherently Buddhist problem. Whereas Buddhism used to be something for bereaved members of the royal family, it fed down to the common people. The fact that everyone knows about the four sufferings and the eight sufferings is an incredible cultural legacy.

In actual fact, I am starting up a “Buddhist sommelier” movement aimed at providing advice suitable to each individual, telling them “Buddhism suggests the following approach” rather than merely preaching morals. In some ways, it’s similar to a movement promoting the qualities of Japanese food. Saying “it’s all over when you die, so it is fine for a crematorium to dispose of your remains,” is much like saying “if you want nutritional support, just eat Calorie Mate.” In some respects, there’s nothing we can do about the increasing number of people like that in our cities. Although I do think it’s important to tell people about the qualities of Japanese food.

Shimada: I do think however that things would be tricky if everyone ended up relying on Buddhist concepts like that.

It’s not that I believe that self-determination is absolute. There will always be things that your family disagree with, but your family are the ones who will arrange a funeral to see you off. That’s an irreconcilable contradiction. Add to that the fact that reality is constantly changing, as evidenced by the term “direct funeral,” which didn’t even exist a decade ago. It is highly significant when a new term like that is coined. The emergence of new terms enables people to do things that they might not have been able to do before. The term “zero funeral” is still in transition at the moment. We won’t have genuine “zero funerals” until we reach the point where cremation leaves virtually no bones behind.

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