

END OF LIFE CARE IN HINDUISM

Introduction of Hinduism

The oldest of the world's major religions has been developing for nearly 5,000 years in the Indian sub-continent. Hinduism is as much a way of life as a religion, one that is specifically tied to Indian culture and history. The word "*Hindu*" is derived from the Persian word for the early civilisation that lived along the Indus River Valley. Hinduism has no founder or prophet and no single sacred book like the Bible or Quran. It is an all-encompassing religion that relates to the needs of diverse peoples in a huge and isolated land.

At the very outset, it should be emphasised that the Hindu customs and rituals relating to death and dying have had an extremely long and complex development. What has broadly been called Hinduism is the religion of about 1000 resettled Bhutanese and some Indian migrant in New Zealand.

This section aims at describing the customs and rituals relating to death and dying among Hindus who have resettled in New Zealand through refugee quota from southern Bhutan and follow their religious traditions strictly. It should be remembered that these customs and rituals observations are in the ancient Indian texts and they are followed at a popular level by these communities.

Before Death

Since some Hindus come from an extended family and some are alone in New Zealand, it is necessary to let as many people see the dying person as possible. It could easily be arranged in consultation with the eldest son, daughter or the spouse. Most Hindus have strong family ties and it is always helpful to talk to dying patients about their family.

Survival after death (reincarnation) and the belief in destiny as determined by action (Karma) constitute the central teachings of Hinduism and it will be helpful if the person dealing with the dying patient has some information about these doctrines. Most Hindus believe in God (Krishna and Rama) and it is usual for them to recite these names at the time of death. The sacred scripture followed by most Hindus in New Zealand and all around the globe is the *Bhagawat Gita* (Songs of the Lord) and it will be helpful if this scripture is available to the dying patient or kept near his or her bed for reading.

The chief of the world of the dead, according to Hindu mythology is *Yama*, the father of humankind and the first one to die. It is believed by most Hindus that after death they would enter heaven and would be reunited with their departed ancestor. Most Hindus believe in the immortality of the soul and its post-existence. The following passages of the *Bhagawat Gita* are usually recited and discussed among Hindus to come to terms with death and dying.

"As the soul passes in this body through childhood, youth and age, even so its taking on of another body, the sage is not perplexed by this."

"Just as the person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new."

"For one that is born, death is certain, and certain is birth for one that has died. Therefore, for what is unavoidable thus should not grieve."

Most Hindus believe in God as the Saviour who by His grace protects the devotee and grants him/her the communion with Himself. There are Hindu priests in every major city. It is always helpful to invite them to visit dying patients in consultation with the members of the family.

Immediately After Death

After the person's last breath, the body is washed and clothed. Many Hindus would prefer to take the dead body home or if possible, they would prefer the person to die at home in the company of family members. The Hindu householders consider their topmost duty to care for the dead and make sure that the dying patient has utmost attention and affection of the family. According to the Hindu mythology, immediate family members are not allowed to eat before the cremation.

The nature of death, according to Hindu mythology, is very complex. It is only the body that dies and the implication of such a view leads to an acceptance of some indestructible soul which is immortal and eternal. It is also believed that after death the eye of the person would go to the sun, the breath to the wind and the body to the mother earth. The modern view of the abode of the dead is extremely varied and complex and most Hindus believe that depending on the nature of action of the dead person, the dead body would be allotted a status in the next life.

The nature of the heaven which is attained by spirits is described in one of the earliest scriptures of the Hindus, the *Rigveda*, and many Hindus believe that the dead person would stay in heaven. It is usual practice that every day food and water should be offered to the dead and every year rice-balls (*pinda*) are offered on the day of the anniversary in a ceremony known as *Sraddha* (faithful). These are funeral rites and are also gestures of goodwill and homage to the dead spirits. If proper ceremonies are not performed, most Hindus believe that the dead person would become a wandering ghost without a proper body. But if ceremonies are performed in the right manner, he or she would have a place in paradise.

Funeral Rites

Although in ancient days burial of the dead was practised, cremation is the usual practice among Hindus today, except for very small children or saintly persons whose bodies are believed not to decompose. The cremation takes place in the "burning *ghats*" especially near the sacred river on open pyre in the same day of the person dies. Cremation is taken to be an offering to the sacred fire by the eldest son, the God who, according to Hindu mythology, was both priest and deity and who would burn the body but protect the soul to be united with the ancestors.

After death the body is taken home and laid on the ground before it is taken for cremation and placed on the funeral pyre. The practice of cremation implies the belief in the destruction of the physical body and Hindus do not believe in the "resurrection of the body". The spirit is believed to ascend to paradise.

Traditionally, the *Sraddha* rites were directed by priests and even today it is still practised. The proper funerals are regarded as essential for the dead as well as living members of the family.