

MEMORIAL SERVICES FOR PETS IN JAPAN

A TALE OF TWO SPANIELS

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The rise of memorial services for pets in Japan reflects a growing demand, showing the increasing influence of pets in Japanese families and society in general. I have not done the research on this phenomenon necessary for a full academic study, but in this essay merely reflect on my own experience of two recent memorial services and share some thoughts about the religious implications for the Buddhist tradition of such memorial rites.

Our Cavalier King Charles Spaniel “Mae” passed away last Sunday—Easter Sunday. She joined her half-sister “Sora,” who had passed last summer. Both were an integral part of our family for more than fourteen years. We were faced not only with how to deal with the grief, but the practical problem of how to properly dispose of the body. The idea of throwing the body out along with the weekly burnable garbage was, of course, unthinkable. We could contact the city office (or a business that handles such matters) to arrange for a pickup, for a small fee, so that the body could be properly disposed of along with road kill and other animal remains of the day, but this was unpalatable. We had anticipated this situation, and a quick search had revealed the option of a memorial ritual and cremation at a local Tendai Buddhist temple. A short visit to the temple provided information on what this involved, and upon confirming that our pet had certainly passed, we made a reservation for a memorial service.

The basic service consists of a short memorial ritual, followed by cremation and disposal of the bones and ashes. A long menu of optional and additional services is also available, similar to such memorial rites and practices for human beings. We could ask for an individual service rather than group service; request ongoing memorial rituals at pre-determined passages of weeks, months, and years; maintain a memorial tablet at the temple along with thousands of other similar tablets; arrange for an individual grave, and so forth, all for an appropriate fee. We decided on an individual service, but otherwise to forego the ongoing

memorial rites, and to take the memorial tablet (and a small urn for some of the bones and ashes) back home for a keepsake. The remaining bones and ashes would be spread out on a special mound on the temple grounds along with the remains of innumerable other pets.

The memorial ritual itself is short—about fifteen minutes—and again similar to memorial rites for human beings. A Buddhist priest in his robes chanted various homages in the usual drone, including a recitation of the Heart Sutra, and closed with the offering of incense by all participants (see photo). The body, wrapped in a burial shroud embroidered with rainbow colors by my wife, was then wheeled into the cremation room next door, where we were invited to use a fresh leaf to place drops of water on the lips of the departed and make our last farewells. After the commencement of the cremation, we were invited to return in about an hour to contemplate and pick up the final dry white bones.

I do not have the expertise or access to information to write a proper academic study of pet memorials in Japan, so this short essay is merely an observation from my limited individual experience. I cannot say how common or widespread this experience is, or how other people respond to such a situation. It does, however, raise a number of interesting questions. Traditionally, for example, animal existence in Buddhism was considered in a negative light, a part of the cycle of transmigration that one may be reborn into as punishment for beast-like behavior. Hence derogatory terms for animals such as *chikushō* 畜生 and *kedamono* 獣. I assume that most Buddhist temples in Japan would refuse to allow the burial of animal remains in a human cemetery on temple grounds, not to mention the quandary of how to respond to the increasingly common request to include the remains of pets in the family grave. Indeed, our temple advertised itself as a specialist in pet memorials, a kind of holy ground specifically for animal burial. But Japanese society is changing; the idea of pets (mostly cats and dogs but also birds and many other sentient beings) as a beloved part of the family is widely accepted. The problem of “pet loss,” the trauma and grief that one must deal with upon the death of a pet, is a common topic of discussion and commiseration. Our experience with pet memorials at a Buddhist temple reflects one way that traditional Buddhism is responding to the current “needs” of Japanese society. I doubt that there is much awareness of whether or not this is a “religious” or even “Buddhist” practice, and yet it is a religious and Buddhist response. Neither am I aware of any attempts to explain these practices in terms of classical Buddhist teachings; in any case such attempts would be of interest only to a few (such as myself) and would be considered irrelevant to most of the people participating in such rituals. Questions such as whether or not the pet is “reborn” someplace (in a Pure Land, or at the “rainbow bridge”) may be considered by some but without deep theological or Buddhological conviction.

As we waited in the parking lot after returning to the temple to pick up and place selected bones into our urn with a choice of special tweezers or long chopsticks, we noticed a number of visitors—some carrying flowers—come to pay their respects and remember their pets at the general burial mound in the temple yard. A large group of more than ten people (probably a family, including all ages from very small children to seniors) gathered in the waiting room next to the crematorium clutching a small box in anticipation of their turn for a memorial service. I believe we all shared the same hope: *pace, pace, requiescat in pace.*



The Buddhist altar where memorial services for pets are conducted