Zikr and Nembutsu at the moment of Death

Abolghasem JAFARI, agjafari@yahoo.com

Abstract:

There are many similarities between Islam and Pure Land Buddhism in the concept of death and what happens at the moment of death to the dying person. In both of religions it is recommended to the dying person to say the Name; for Buddhist, saying the Name of Amitabha, and for Muslim, saying the Name of Allah in the form of Shahadah. After death, it is believed that, for faithful Buddhist, Amitabha and his companions will come to say the greeting and guide to Pure Land, and in Islam, Prophet Muhammad and his companions and some angels will come to greeting the believer and lead him/her to Paradise. In both religions it is said that there are some evil people who will go to Hell. In both of the religions, it is believed that, the paradise or Pure Land is not the last stage of the soul and the soul shall develop to gain enlightenment or more higher spiritual levels.

Moment of Death

Moment of death from religious point of view is the most significant turn point of life for human being. People at the moment of death might see the result of what they did during their lives and go to paradise or Hell (Pure Land of Hell/samsara). Therefore, in some of the world religions there are many deathbed rites for dying person in order to help him/her to pass this terrible stage in safe and peace.

Death in Buddhism

In Theravada Buddhist countries, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand, it is believed that, when a person dies, rebirth will occur immediately in the next moment. Therefore, the last moment of this life and its special rite is an important factor in determining the condition for rebirth in the next life. In Theravada Buddhism person’s consciousness is the subject of rebirth. According to these scriptures when past karmic deeds or such signs settle on the dying individual, then a vision of the future destiny occurs, such as the appearance of fire signifying hell, a mother’s womb indicating rebirth in the human realm, or pleasant groves and divine palaces for a future in heavenly realm. Then comes a momentary “death awareness” (cuticitta) followed immediately by “rebirth linking consciousness” (patisandhivinndna) signifying the next life.
In Mahayana Buddhist countries such as Tibet, China and Japan, there is an “in-between stage” between death and the next life, wherein one is transformed into an entity called Bardo. In pre-Buddhist Indian myths, Bardo is originally referred to as a semi-divine being associated with fertility and the god Soma. This baby size Bardo, it is believed that, has forty-nine days to find a new womb to rebirth. Tibetan monks have designed some rites to help this Bardo to pass this dangerous stage. In Pure Land Buddhism chanting the Name of Amitabha or reciting different Pure Land sutras as a deathbed ritual are recommended.

Death in Islam

According to Islam there are two type of Paradise and Hell. Temporary paradise and eternal Paradise and temporary hell and eternal hell. Soul after death will go to the temporary paradise or hell, in accord to his or her deeds and actions and at the end of this world and after the last judgment, God will send them to their eternal place of paradise or hell. The point of these two type of paradise and hell is that many people who have little sin, after staying a limited time in the temporary hell, may be forgiven and go to the paradise. Zikr and saying the Name of God, during the life time and at the moment of death is the main tool to go to paradise.

Pure Land Buddhism

The eighteenth Vow says: “If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying my Name perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.”

Shan Tao in the Contemplation Sutra says: “If sentient beings, though they have committed evil all their lives, should say my Name at the time of death, continuing for ten times, and yet not attain birth, may I not realize the supreme enlightenment.”

As it is obvious, the second text mentions the time of death for saying the Name ten times. Shinran explains this phase as that in encouraging us to say the Name that embodies the Vow, the Tathāgata added perhaps even to the words ten times to show that there is no set number of times the Name must be said and to teach sentient beings that there is no determined hour or occasion for saying it. Since we have been given this Vow by Amida Tathāgata, we can take any occasion in daily life for saying the Name and need not wait to recite it at the very end of life: “we should simply give ourselves up totally to the entrusting with sincere mind of Amida. When we
realize this true and real shinjin, we enter completely into the compassionate light
that grasps, never to abandon, and hence become established in the stage of the truly
settled. Thus, it is written.”

Although Shinran has not any emphasize on saying the Name at the time of death
but there is a special rite for saying the Name at the moment of death for believers of
the pure land Buddhism. Perhaps the words of masters like Shantao and Ch’ing-wen
are clearer that other sources in the detail of what happens at the moment of death
from Pure Land viewpoint. Here is an instance:

**Quote from Dharma-gate of True Faith (by Master Ch’ing-wen of Shan-yin):**

**Question:** “There are people who say, “It is claimed that at the time of death, one
beholds the approach of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas, radiant with light and
bearing a dais; that there is heavenly music and wondrous fragrance, as they come
to welcome one to birth in the Pure Land. Bit this is all the work of maras.” Is this
assertion true?

**(Answer:)** According to the Sutra of the Samadhi of Heroic Advance, when one
performs samadhi, maras of the five skandhas may appear. According to the Treatise
on the Mahayana, when one performs samadhi, exterior maras (heavenly maras) may
appear. According to the Treatise on Samatha and Vipasyana, when one performs
samadhi, time spirits may appear. All of these occur because people who practice
meditation avail themselves of self-power, and the seeds of maras’ work are
unfailingly made active at that time. When you clearly recognize this and apply the
proper remedy, you can make them disperse immediately. If you assume that you
have gained the wisdom of sages, you will be beset with the obstruction of maras…
With the nembutsu-samadhi that we are practicing, we rely on the power of the
Buddha. If persons are close to the king, no one will dare assault them; so it is with
us. This is, in short, because Amida Buddha has the power of great compassion, the
power of great Vows, the power of great wisdom, the power of great samadhi, the
great majestic powers, the power to destroy wrong, the great power to subdue maras,
the power of the divine eye to see far, the power of divine ear to hear at great distance
the power to look penetratingly into people’s minds, the power of light shining
everywhere and grasping sentient beings. Amida Buddha has all these powers of
inconceivable virtue. Why then should Amida not be able to protect persons of the
nembutsu and keep them from hindrances up until death? … If one were beset by
the obstructions of maras at the time of death even though one said the nembutsu,
what would it mean for Amida to have the power of light shining everywhere and
grasping sentient beings? Moreover, what people of the nembutsu perceive at the point of death is revealed in many sutras, which are all the words of the Buddha. How can we dismiss it as the state of being obstructed; let us awaken the true faith.”

According to these words of Shan-tao and Master Ch’ing-wen, dying person will encounter with:

1. Buddha Amida and Bodhisattvas,
2. mara(s).
3. heavenly music (welcoming from Amida and his companions to the practitioner of the Name.)
4. leading the soul to Pure Land. Because the only reason of descending of Amida from heaven is to give birth to practitioner in the Pure Land that is his/her aspiration.

**Moment of death in Islam**

There are considerably references in Muslim scriptures, including Quran and Hidiths that are talking about the moment of death and what would happen for the dying person, believer or unbeliever. According to the Quran, God Himself is the main reason of death. He leads the soul to the other world: “God takes the souls at the time of their death”. (39:42) God is not alone in this event and angels are His permanent companions: “The angle of death, who is appointed over every one of you (and other angels), will cause you to die, and all of you will come back toward your Lord.”(32:11)

In Muslim Hadiths, there are lots of detailed descriptions about death and what happens in that moment too. In one Hadith Imam Sadiq states: At the moment of death, person will see Holy Prophet and Imamas (=real companion and successors of the Prophet Muhammad) and will see the reality of his/her deeds. In another Hadith Imam Sadiq said: “All Muslims should say the Name of God at the final moments of life. Because one who would say the name of God at the last moment of life, will go to paradise.” Muslims, therefore, have a special rite called Talqin for one who is in the deathbed and ask him/her to say Shahadah. Main part of all of

---

1 end of the question from Master Ch’ing-wen. P.47
2 Bihar ul-Anwar, vol2. P.284
3 Usul Kafi, vol1, p251
these rites and rituals is Zikr and saying the Name of God. In brief, according to these texts, the dying person might see these five things:

1. God and angels,
2. Prophet Muhammad and Imams, including Imam Ali and his sons.
3. Paradise and Hell,
4. Satan(s),
5. Karma or result of his/her deeds.

Summary:

According to what we mentioned from Islamic sources and Jodoshin Shu sources, Zikr and saying the Name at the moment of death is very important element for person in rebirth in the pure land or going to paradise. By comparing the similarities between Islam and Buddhism about the events of the moment of death and what might happen after death for faithful person we can come to this conclusion that the saint and sages of both religions had similar religious experiences of what is called now in psychology as the near-death experience.