

A brief introduction to the Japanese funeral

1. After death

- 末期の水/water of the last moment

Immediately after a death, relatives moisten the dying or deceased person's lips with water.

- 神棚封じ/closing of the kamidana

Many Japanese homes maintain Buddhist altars, or butsudan (仏壇), and Shinto shrines, or kamidana (神棚). When a death occurs, the shrine is closed and covered with white paper to keep out the impure spirits of the dead.

- 納棺/encoffining

The body is washed and the orifices are blocked with cotton or gauze. An “encoffining” ritual is sometimes performed, in which professional nōkansha (納棺者) ritually dress and prepare the body and place it in the coffin. The ceremony is now rarely performed, and may be limited to rural areas where older traditions are maintained.

2. Wake

- 通夜/wake

Held as soon as possible after death, a Japanese wake is called tsuya (通夜), lit. “passing the night”. All funeral guests wear black.

The guests are seated, with immediate relatives seated closest to the front. The Buddhist priest then chants a section from a sutra. The family members will each offer incense three times to the incense urn in front of the deceased. At the same time, the assembled guests will perform the same ritual at another location behind the family members' seats. The wake ends once the priest has completed the sutra. The closest relatives may stay and keep vigil with the deceased overnight in the same room.

3. Funeral

- 告別式/funeral

The funeral proper, called kokubetsu-shiki (告別式), is usually on the day after the wake. The procedure is similar to the wake, and incense is offered while a priest chants a sutra. The ceremony differs slightly as the deceased receives a new Buddhist name (戒名, kaimyō; lit. “precept name”) written in Kanji. This name is said to prevent the return of the deceased if their name is called. The kanji for these kaimyō are usually very ancient, and sometimes with esoteric meanings.

4. Cremation

- 火葬/cremation

The coffin is placed on a tray in the crematorium. The family witnesses the sliding of the body into the cremation chamber. A cremation usually takes about two hours, and the family returns at a scheduled time when the cremation has been completed.

- 骨揚げ/bone-picking ceremony

The relatives pick the bones out of the ashes and transfer them to the urn using large chopsticks or metal picks, two relatives sometimes holding the same bone at the same time with their chopsticks. The bones of the feet are picked up first, and the bones of the head are picked up last. The hyoid bone, which is located in the neck, is the most significant bone to be placed into the urn.

5. Grave

- 墓/grave

A typical Japanese grave, haka (墓), is usually a family grave consisting of a stone monument, with a place for flowers, incense, and water in front of the monument and a chamber or crypt underneath for the ashes.

The names of the deceased are often but not always engraved on the front of the monument. When a married person dies before his or her spouse, the name of the spouse may also be engraved on the stone, with the letters painted red.

- お墓のマンション/grave apartment

The high prices of funeral plots, costing on average 2 million yen, have led to a new service of Grave Apartments, where a locker-sized grave can be purchased for about 400,000 yen. Some of these may even include a touch screen showing a picture of the deceased, messages, a family tree, and other information.

6. Mourning and memorial

- 法要/memorial

Memorial services depend on local customs. Usually, there are a number of memorial services following the death. Most commonly observed are the Buddhist service on the seventh day after death, shōnanoka (初七日), and the 49th day, shijūkūnichi (四十九日). In many traditions, the urn containing the ashes is interred in a ceremony called nōkotsu (納骨) on the 49th day, and the family stays in mourning until this. After that, there is a memorial service on the Obon festival in honor of the dead. The festival may be held in the 1st year, sometimes in the 3rd and 5th, 7th and 13th years, and a number of times afterwards up to either the 39th or the 50th year.