



Purvi Patel

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain but for the heart to conquer it.

Rabindranath Tagore

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Death is a universal experience. Regardless of one's culture, religion, race or beliefs, we will all die. Hinduism views death very uniquely. Hindus simultaneously mourn and celebrate the loss of loved ones. While normal emotions are associated with loss, death is usually handled well. Any death in the Hindu religion is considered one of many deaths that a soul experiences as they move toward

P. Patel (✉)

Department of Geriatrics, Palliative Medicine, Continuing Care - Hospice and Palliative Medicine, Southern California Permanente Medical Group, Pasadena, CA, USA

e-mail: pmpatel13@gmail.com

spiritual growth and enlightenment—it is the next step in the larger journey of life and is a natural experience.

For many people, whether they are spiritual or not, “healing is often more important than curing, yet most health care education is primarily focused on curative treatments, neglecting the importance of end-of-life needs [2].” “Religion and spirituality specifically influence how people view their own health, as well as the larger health care system, by helping patients and families to cope with illness [3].” For these reasons, it is imperative that individuals in the health care field have some level of understanding of religion and its impact on well-being, whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. This chapter will focus on Hinduism and end-of-life care and rituals.

16.1 Background

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world and the oldest known religion still in practice [1]. Hinduism is the main religion of India [2]. Based on ancient Hindu scriptures, it is believed that Hinduism has been practiced for over 8000 years [1]. It is unique in that it has no founder, no beginning and no one Holy book [1]. The most sacred Hindu text is the Veda, which means wisdom. The Veda itself consists of 4 books.

There is one God (Brahman) with many forms [1]. Central to religion is the belief that God is within each living creature and object, and it is the journey and purpose of life to become aware of this divine essence. Spirituality is a way of life. Hinduism worships hundreds of deities, each representing their own core values and characteristics. The three major deities are Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer). Hindus choose which god or goddess they are devoted to.

Daily worship is done as a family and usually performed in the morning before everyone starts the day [1]. This morning worship is called “puja” and consists of lighting incense, reading prayers and meditation [1].

Family and community are highly valued by Hindus [1], so when caring for a patient who is Hindu, it is not uncommon to have many family members, and even close friends, visit the patient or crowd the room. Understanding this and having patience for this large involvement of people is important when caring for your Hindu patients. This is more pertinent for end-of-life care since this is a time when most family and friends will want to visit or be present.

16.2 Reincarnation and Karma

A central value to the Hindu faith is reincarnation. Reincarnation is the belief that when someone dies, their physical body is gone but their soul is reborn in a different form—transition to another life [2]. This cycle continues until the soul finds its true destiny. Each incarnation depends on the actions of that person in their

previous life, also referred to as Karma (which is based on your words, thoughts and actions)—*a moral cause and effect of thoughts and actions* [1]. If you have lived a life of more good actions and thoughts than bad, and have devoted yourself to God, you will have a more fortunate rebirth. If you have not lived a good life, or have bad Karma, you are likely to be reborn to a less fortunate life, which is considered another chance to create good Karma.

Suffering is a key component of Karma since it represents thoughts or actions from the current life or a past life [1]. This journey can take many lifetimes and once enlightenment is reached it is known as Moksha—release from the cycle of death. While death is a sad time of mourning the loss of the individual, it is also a time to celebrate as the soul has either reached or is closer to reaching Moksha.

16.3 Body Preparation

The preparation of the body is a very important part of the entire process. The deceased is washed with ghee (clarified butter), honey, milk and yogurt. A thread is sometimes tied around the neck and wrist and the body is sprinkled with water from the Ganges (which is considered the holy river). A leaf from a sacred basil bush (this plant is called “Tulsi”) is placed on the tongue. Essential oils can also be applied to the forehead in addition to turmeric, which is placed on females, and sandalwood which is placed on males. The palms are placed in a position of prayer and the big toes are tied together. The body is positioned so the head is facing south, symbolizing a return to Mother Earth. The family will pray around the body but avoid touching it since it is considered unclean. They will recite prayers, chants and hymns, with the goal of helping the person to keep a focus on Brahman. The body is dressed or draped in white clothing or a white cloth. If a woman dies before her husband, she will be dressed in all red. If she dies after her husband, she will wear all white clothing for the remainder of her life, as a sign of the lack of beauty and celebration that comes with being a widow. Lastly, a garland of flowers is draped around the neck.

16.4 Cremation

Hindus practice specific rituals during and after death, and they prefer to die at home. Once someone dies, cremation is the preferred funeral rite. This is done because after death the physical body serves no purpose and doesn't need to be preserved. This is also why Hindus do not use “RIP” or “rest in peace” to respect the passing of a loved one. After death that individual, or soul, is not thought to be eternally resting, but rather waiting to be reborn into the next life. Cremation is believed to be the quickest way to release the soul into the next life. Flames are also thought to represent Brahma.

The body should remain at home until the cremation is performed, which ideally occurs within 24 h of passing. The exception to cremation is with infants

and young children, in which burial is acceptable after death. It is believed that they have not lived long enough to acquire bad karma and therefore do not need cremation to release their souls since they are still “pure” [1].

Funeral rites are performed in the form of chants or mantras and are overseen by either a Hindu priest or the eldest son of the bereaved. Family and friends may read religious texts or sing religious songs. It is customary for family and friends to visit the home of the bereaved to offer their condolences. During this time, any pictures of deities in the deceased’s home will be turned to face the wall.

16.5 Funeral and The Mourning Period

Hindu funerals are traditionally only attended by men, but modern funerals allow women to attend as well. After the funeral, the ashes are scattered over a sacred body of water, traditionally this would be the Ganges river, or a place of importance to the deceased.

When the funeral is over mourners wash and change their clothes before entering the house. This refers back to the belief that the deceased’s body is unclean. The time following someone’s death is considered impure and the time of this impurity can last days to a year, depending on the caste—the lower the caste, the longer the duration of impurity [1]. The mourning period can last 10–30 days. In this time families will often display a picture of their loved one in their homes, adorned with garlands of flowers. On day 13 after the death, the grieving family will hold a ceremony to help release the soul of the deceased for reincarnation. On the one-year anniversary of the death the family will hold another memorial event to honor the life of the loved one who passed away, which is known as Shradh. This event may occur on only the first anniversary of the death or can be done annually. During Shradh food is given to the poor in memory of the deceased. During this time the family of the deceased will not buy new clothes or new items, go to any parties or have any celebrations. Shradh lasts for one month.

Autopsies and organ donation are not traditionally performed, unless an autopsy is required by law. Autopsies are considered disruptive to the body, and in turn to the soul, inhibiting it from being released and moving forward to the next life [1]. Organ donation also disrupts the body and if a major organ is donated (heart, liver, kidney) then part of the body continues to live on, and this will interfere with reincarnation [1]. It is also thought that part of the organ donor’s karma will be transferred to the recipient [1].

16.6 Suffering

How we approach death and think about suffering varies greatly between religion and culture, and our spiritual beliefs formulate our ideas and perceptions about end-of-life [1].

Spiritual suffering happens at the end-of-life for Hindus when they feel their responsibilities have been left incomplete. In order to mitigate this, Hindus attempt to focus their attention and energy on thoughts of Brahman in order to facilitate the soul leaving the body in the highest possible state [1].

Some believe that enduring physical suffering can lead to more spiritual growth and in turn a more fortunate rebirth since spiritual suffering is connected to Karma. Suffering is an important part of life because it represents past actions and thoughts that were negative. By enduring suffering, you are paying the debt incurred for these past negative behaviors in previous lives [1].

Death should not be sought nor prolonged. There are varying views when it comes to Hinduism and physician aid in dying. Some believe that requesting to die prior to the body dying on its own will cause the soul and body to be separated at an unnatural time. This applies to both suicide and physician aid in dying. The Karma of both the patient and the doctor who agrees to the request will be affected. Others believe that by helping to end suffering you are performing a good deed and therefore fulfilling your moral obligation. It is also thought that artificially prolonging life, with mechanical ventilation or artificial nutrition and hydration, unless directly linked to improving quality of life, causes the soul to remain on earth past its natural time [1]. “Fasting near the end of life is considered a source of spiritual purification, so Hindus may also object to tube feeding for these reasons [3].”

Willfully ending life (i.e., suicide) is disfavored because it would result in a large karmic debt [1]. Death should come naturally at the appropriate time [1].

16.7 End of Life

The hospice philosophy emphasizes promoting the quality of end of life, and its care often focuses on pain and symptom management. In Hinduism, this is a concept that is often hard to accept because of their belief with suffering and the benefits that result because of it. It is important to remember that each patient has the right to make their own decisions, and the right to be as comfortable or uncomfortable as they want. Even under hospice care, we should be supportive of these decisions.

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