

Qingming (“Clear and Bright”)

Many Chinese annually celebrate the Qingming Jie (“clear and bright” day) to honour their dead, traditionally by cleaning their ancestors’ (the closest relatives’) graves and making offerings there. It falls on the fifteenth day from the spring equinox (when the sun is right over the equator), and locally, this, unlike other Chinese feast-days which are lunar, always falls on 5th April. Busy modern Chinese would, however, usually observe it on the nearest week-end or convenient day.

What is the story behind the event, and how do Buddhists (or anyone) celebrate it in a meaningful way today? There are at least two traditional stories connected with the festival. The oldest story goes back to the Spring and Autumn Period, when it was declared a 3-day memorial Hanshi day (寒食节, “cold-food day”) in honour of **Jie Zitui** (介子推), a loyal servant of **Duke Wen of Jin** (晉文公 Jinwen Gong) (697-628 BCE).

The story behind Hanshi day began on one hot summer afternoon during the exile of **Chong’er** (Duke Wen’s previous name). The prince was exhausted and hungry. His advisor and personal friend, Jie Zitui, made some meat soup for him despite the difficulty of finding any meat. Chong’er enjoyed the soup but wondered where the meat came from. Jie had cut a piece of flesh from his own thigh to make the soup! Deeply moved, Chong’er promised to reward him one day.

When Chong’er became Duke, he forgot about Jie, who had quietly retired into the mountains. As soon as Duke Wen recalled Jie, he went in search of him. Resorting to an expedience, he ordered that three side of his mountain be set ablaze, hoping that Jie would emerge through the opening. Tragically, Jie and his mother died in the flames. The devastated Duke declared three days of mourning for them, that is, Qingming day and the days before and after it, when no fire should be lighted. Since no cooking could be done without fire, it is called “cold-food” day.

Over a thousand years later, the Tang emperor **Xuanzong** (唐玄宗), noticed that too many of his subjects were making expensive and extravagant ceremonies and offerings in honour of their ancestors. To curb such extravagance, the emperor declared in 732 that such rituals should only be performed at the ancestors’ graves on Qingming day. In 1949, however, the Communist Party of China banned the feast-day, but it continues to be observed in Hong Kong, Macau and amongst the overseas Chinese. The festival, however, was reinstated in China in 2008.

The Qingming festival, as such, is significant in two ways for us today. Firstly, it is a solemn reminder for us to remember the goodness of others, especially those who have supported and served us in our times of need. Jie Zitui’s soup made from his own flesh symbolizes the sacrifices of those who have given us life and health, that is, especially our parents. These are the people we should support and show our love while they still are living. Funeral rituals, even elaborate ones, do not benefit the dead, especially when we have neither loved nor cared for them while they lived. Such elaborate rituals could be more of a guilt trip, or worse, merely as a self-serving defensive front to falsely impress society for the sake of wealth and status.

We should love and care for them while they live, no matter how difficult this may be. For once, they pass on, they are reborn into new lives. Our turn will come, and surely we would be treated as we have treated our own elders. So we need to break the vicious cycle of superstition and negative values right now, so that the snake stops biting its own tail, and is free to evolve.

The Buddha teaches that there are really no dead people. All beings are reborn. We can only honour their wholesome memories. We cultivate lovingkindness by recalling the good people they are and the kindness they have shown. When our minds are joyfully stilled (even momentarily) with unconditional love, then we direct that energy towards the deceased.¹ This can be done not just for parents or relatives, but also for anyone (such as friends) whom we care for, and even for animals (such as our pets).²

Qingming Jie is sometimes called "grave-cleaning day" because family members would go there once a year to clear up the grave area and then give offerings and prayers there. In such societies, like Singapore, where land is scarce and expensive, and the dead are more commonly cremated, graves are becoming non-existent. In some cases, our ancestors' graves could be very far away (even in another country). Grave-cleaning, however, can be a great bonding act for the family if this is possible and done in a wholesome way.

The point is that our respect and love for the dead should not merely be ritualized and guilt-bound. Such respect and love should be spontaneous and meaningful: it should be done with the right mind and a full heart, that is, with lovingkindness. And this can be done from anywhere, when we, either alone or with others, recall the goodness of the deceased, and dedicate to them the good karma that we ourselves have done.

According to Buddhist teachings, this is how it happens. Imagine I tell you here that I have written this reflection with you specially in mind, or that a loved one tells you he has given some time and resources to help some earthquake or tsunami victims in your name. Surely you would feel warmed up with a wholesome mind. The departed, if they are still lingering nearby for some reason, would at once connect with our positive mental energies, and be free of their insecure attachments, and fare on happily.

Otherwise, our dearly departed would have been reborn elsewhere as a deva or another human, or some other being. All such forms do not need our offerings and prayers, and cannot benefit from them. Only our lovingkindness, the power of love, can touch and change their lives.

Rituals, on other hand, can be an excuse for not really loving the deceased. If we truly love the departed, we do not need the professional priests (we do not know what they are doing, anyway) and paying them guilt money. We can and should dedicate our lovingkindness to those whom we love by our own actions. Performing rituals blindly is simply and irresponsibly perpetuating superstition. It is like sitting in a leaking boat and rowing on dry land!³ The best way to honour our ancestors is to live now in goodness and benefitting others at the same time. After all, we too are ancestors to our future generations.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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¹ See **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Khp 7/6 = Pv 1.5/4 f) = SD 2.7.

² On how our pets benefit, see <http://sites.google.com/site/piyaweeeklyreflection/090121AnimalsGoToHeaven.-pdf?attredirects=0>

³ In **Tapo,kamma Sutta** (S 4.1), the Buddha, says that self-mortification is like the rudder and oars of a boat stranded on dry land (S 4.1/1:103) = SD 79.8.