

What follows is an account of what I experienced during the traditional Japanese Bhuddist funeral ceremonies of my wife. I know some things are different from what a Westerner might expect, and some people are interested in what happens at times like this. And, some are interested in what my thoughts or feelings were, or possibly, what my wife was like. So I write this hoping you will read it with interest, and, it's a sort of cleansing exercise and reminder for me, of what was good about this experience. I hope you enjoy or learn something from it.

My wife, Takako Saito, passed away at about 8:10pm on Thurs. July 29th, at home in bed with our dog JoJo and I. In Japan, when people die in the hospital they are very quickly taken to their home to rest for a few days prior to cremation. During this time at home, the body is kept cool with dry ice if need be, and is visited and seen by family, friends and neighbours. For these days it is an 'open house' concept. In our case she was at home when she died. After her death, JoJo and I remained alone with the body for about 12 hours, until about 8:15am Fri. July 30th, when the doctor came to 'officially' pronounce her death and remove the life support tubes from her body. Then the nurse helpers cleaned and changed her into her wedding gown. Then we put on or near her some special things that would stay with her for the next couple days up to and including cremation, such as rings and jewellery, pictures, cosmetics, lavender essential oil, etc... Some neighbours did visit that day, and the immediate family was there too. The nurse, doctor and mother asked me about what kind of funeral service I wanted. I think they assumed being a foreigner I would want a Christian one. So I wrote the following e-mail to the doctor and a couple bilingual friends to let the family know what I thought about this:

“Takako believed in the things said and done by the Indian Saint who married us (Amritanandamaya, Holy Mother of Heavenly Bliss) and in people like Mother Theresa and Jesus Christ. Though we were married in a Hindu-like ceremony, that Saint is, in fact, non-denominational. And Takako too, didn't believe in 'religions' per se, but rather in the words and deeds of those who were truly spiritual and crossed all borders and encompassed the best of all religions. We were alike in this respect. When asked, I usually say we're Bhuddist, because maybe that one seems most close to how we lived, but truly, we aspired to those things that cannot be labelled solely by religious name, but are shared by all.

I think she would want a simple, inexpensive ceremony, whether it were Christian or Bhuddist. I think she would prefer a funeral home close to here, a local one rather than being carried too far from her home. I think she would want what's best for the family and all, and nothing lavish. She was pure of heart and mind, extremely honest, and relished the simple things of life, so I don't think she would see any point in having anything too complicated or expensive.

Please communicate this to the right people and help me make arrangements for later today.”

In fact, after I experienced the fine arrangements that were made by the family, and found out how much it cost, I was a little shocked. The brother explained that it was comparatively cheap and simple, but knowing how Takako liked flowers, they did a little extra in this regard, as I will explain in detail as I go along. But let me say now that I will be forever grateful for what the family did and how they did it during this time. While there were problems and miscommunication between the family and I prior to Takako's death, it seemed all that disappeared after she died, much to everyone's satisfaction. I'm sure it makes Takako smile too.

They wanted to keep her body at home another day, till Sat, but I wasn't comfortable sleeping with the corpse another night, so I asked them to take the body to the funeral home. I had a very important high profile playing job that night, and had to leave the house about 4pm. They were putting Takako into the vehicle to be driven to the funeral home the very moment I was pulling out for my gig. So tears welled in my eyes as I waved good-bye, me on my way to the gig by car, and Takako on the way to the funeral home. I was told later by the bandleader I played my ass off that night. I doubt it, but would like to think so.

The next morning, Sat July 31st, the family came to my house at about 2pm to pick me up and prepare to go to the funeral home. We wore all black. The day before, the funeral people asked me to prepare some memorabilia. They said they would display these things prominently for all to see at the funeral home. When we arrived at the funeral home, we took an elevator downstairs to the basement level. After exiting the elevator, there was an entry foyer area where they had artfully displayed the things I had prepared on a table. There was our framed wedding certificate, many picture albums of our wedding, honeymoon and vacations, Takakos' favourite crystal wine glasses with some unopened champagne, some mementoes from the 'spiritual' wedding ceremony we had in April of 2000 (done by Amritanandamaya, or simply, AMMA, the Holy Mother of Heavenly Bliss) prior to the 'official' Singapore government wedding, some Star bucks coffee, Takakos' cosmetics, and various other items of fond, private memories. Later, when the guests would begin to arrive, they could stop there and browse leisurely through all this stuff, gaining some insight to our life together, and to Takakos' personal side many of them had never been aware of.

Sometime after our arrival but before the arrival of the guests, the monk arrived and the immediate family and I were called into a small room to meet him. I was told that he would be there, privately chanting and praying for Takako until the ceremony, and that what he was doing would be explained to me later. While the explanation part wasn't necessarily done as I had imagined, it seems to me now that all that was necessary to be done, was.

Down the hallway from this memorabilia table was a large room where Takako was, and across the hall from that, smaller tatami rooms for the family to change and stay. At this time they asked me to go to the main room where Takako was to make any final changes. She was in a box, clothed in her white wedding gown, with the things we had placed with her the day before. I only changed her wig to her favourite one, and added some rings on her fingers. Then they put the lid on, with a sort of door left open so one could only view the head, not the body, and moved her to the front of the room, in the center of a huge array of flowers stretching all the way from left to right, and to the ceiling. Above her and in the center was a nicely framed photo of Takako that had been taken on the night of our marriage party while she was wearing her special evening gown and adornments. In front of all this was a table with ceremonial items used for the ceremony like incense, a prayer bell, candles, etc... Later for the ceremony proper, the Bhuddist monk would sit there, facing Takako. The rest of the room had chairs for guests. Her favourite music played softly in the background, including the song I wrote called "Saitos' Serenade".

Then distant relatives began to arrive, some of whom came from afar, and eventually a few invited guests. Everyone took a seat, with the family in the front. Family members were given ribbons to wear on their left side at waist level, signifying their relationship to the deceased, and some prayer beads that we were to hold in our left hand. The head of the funeral home made some announcement, I think to explain what was going to happen. Then the Buddhist monk came in, sat in front of Takako and that table mentioned earlier, and proceeded to chant and pray for a long time! Occasionally we were to raise our hands to our hearts in typical prayer like fashion, and we were given books with what he was chanting in Japanese characters (not that anyone could follow it).

At some important point the brother and I were the first to be guided to stand up and proceed to the centermost table in front of the room with Takako, the huge backdrop of flowers and the monk in front of us, and the rest of the room and guests behind us. On this table there were two bowls of granulated incense and hot coals and a smaller version of Takako's picture in the center. We took two snippets of the incense and put them into the coals, then silently did a very brief prayer of our choosing. Then we proceeded to sit in some chairs to the right of the monk facing the other guests in the room. Starting with immediate family and spreading to all other guests, this same ritual was done in pairs of two people. They would proceed to this table, first bow to Takako, then to the family seated there, then do the incense prayer thing, then repeat both bows and return to their seat.

Then the monk gave a talk. Though obviously I didn't understand his Japanese, I was told he said something like this: "Takako was young and some of us were shocked that someone so young could die suddenly. But this should remind us to think (now) about where we are going after our demise. Her death should prompt us to think of the spiritual and how we are to live out our lives, to best prepare ourselves for the inevitable. He also said his beliefs and those of the Christians were very, very similar". Then he left. The head of the funeral home then made another brief announcement and we were told there was food in the other room. They prepared in both the private family tatami rooms and an adjacent room to where Takako was, a traditional Japanese dinner of sushi. We ate and drank (too much saki). I enjoyed getting drunk with the family and sharing stories somehow despite the language gap. Yukiko (the sister) and her two Americanised kids were vital and in huge demand for this translation stuff!

The main room was kept open for anyone to visit at any time, and in fact, it's expected that all family members would stay all through the night with (or nearby in the facility) the body. As we ate and drank and talked in one room, the occasional sound of Takako's name could be heard, followed by tears, and the prayer bell being rung, by those who repeatedly paid last respects throughout the night. The smell of incense permeated the room. The incense is supposed to be kept lit all night. Each time someone approaches the body, they light the incense, say a prayer, and ring the bell.

I left under guard (ha ha!) at 3am. Under guard by the mother and sister because of how much I had to drink. I wanted to drive home to prepare some things for the next day, sleep in my own bed, and change. On Sunday the first of Aug., exactly the same day four years ago Takako and I had our official Singapore gov't wedding, I woke up about 7am. The mother and sister left the house before me by cab. I got ready for the cremation day ceremony and arrived back at the funeral home with JoJo at about 9:45am. Shortly

after our arrival I was told to prepare a speech to give at the cremation ceremony later at noon. I had about an hour to do so. The brother had to also. After I finished my speech, with her kids help, the sister translated the speech into Japanese to read it after my English one. I will copy my speech in full at the end of this, exactly what I said.

Then the guests arrived again for a 12-1pm ceremony. Sundays' ceremony went very similarly to Saturdays'. We sat, the monk came and chanted, prayed, rang the bell, then the brother and I gave our speeches. Then what happened next took the two Western musician friends of mine there by surprise.

The funeral staff removed the dry ice and wheeled out Takakos' coffin to the middle of the room and uncovered her for display to all present. I was told to approach first and add or remove anything I wanted. I added the things I wanted burnt with her, which they had conveniently prepared for me, like the original dried roses and Holy powder saved from our spiritual wedding by AMMA. I added these and the container they had been stored in, along with the coffee and pictures of us and JoJo, etc... The only thing I removed was the diamond wedding ring I had given her on our first wedding anniversary. I began to take the other ring, blessed by AMMA, then changed my mind and left it. And I began to take the bracelet I had made for her but it wouldn't come off, and I took this as a sign she wanted to take it with her! Indeed Darling! Then we were all given flowers to put on the body, and starting with the mother and I, we proceeded to cover her with flowers. I then called to JoJo, our dog. I said, "JoJo, jump", and she put her paws up onto the side of the coffin and looked in at her departed master. This happened twice and I told JoJo the second time, "...say good-bye to Takako...". I think on some level, the dog knew what was happening (she's a smart dog). By the way, I was so grateful the dog was allowed. Takako would have been happy about it, and one of the family members commented that everyone thought the dog was SO well behaved. I never had any doubt of that, and in fact, I never had a leash on her once for those two whole days. In this I certainly broke with Japanese custom!

When this was done they covered the coffin and the monk led me and the coffin outside to a waiting hearse. Only the driver and I were in the hearse with my wife. The cremation place was right next door, and as the hearse pulled up to that entrance area, the other family members were arriving there by foot.

In the cremation building we gathered in the area where the body is burned and a table was erected with her picture on it. She was put into the furnace room and the door shut. Then we were led upstairs in the building to a room with drinks to wait. After the cremation was finished, it was announced and we were led back downstairs where the door opened and the table came out with Takakos' burnt remains exposed for all gathered there to see. The cremation man gently brushed the bone fragments onto two metal trays and placed them on a table with two sets of large metal chopsticks and the ceremonial urn container. Starting with me, then again proceeding with everyone present in pairs, we took turns using the chopsticks to place the bones into the container. Occasionally the man would say which bones they were. When all in the container, I asked if I could touch them and he said, of course. I did, and gently rocked them as if I would have done lovingly to her head. Then the container was sealed and enclosed by a decorative silk covering. Then we were led by foot back to the funeral parlour, me carrying the main urn, the mother carrying a smaller one, and the brother carrying the picture.

The funeral staff had prepared in advance of our arrival a nice lunch with more drinks, and a table for Takako (and her picture) at the head of the room. Takako was served like all of us! They asked me, would Takako prefer tea or saki, and I said tea. Then we ate, mostly in silence, while Takako's food and drink sat in front of her remains. I began crying at this point and the sister rubbed my back and said, waving her hand throughout the air, "Takako is all around us now". In the rear of the room they had gathered all of our personal effects from the tatami rooms the night before and also all the memorabilia, but thankfully, when it was time to leave, they said they would bring these to my house later. I was to leave only with JoJo and Takako's container of bone fragments. I placed Takako in the passenger side seat of my car, JoJo in the back, and drove home.

The family arrived at my house a little after me, and the funeral people came with all the rest of everything and also, importantly, brought fresh flowers and arranged Takako appropriately according to custom, in the area I had prepared in advance. That area was Takako's most beloved piece of furniture, a wooden dresser from Spain located in our bedroom. I had cleaned it in advance. Now, she rests in our bedroom, facing the bed and I, with the prayer bell, incense, candles, Buddhist things from the funeral, and AMMA's picture and prayer beads. I will follow the custom and light the candles and incense and ring the prayer bell appropriately.

As for her other things, that were displayed for all to see in the foyer of the funeral parlour, I will rearrange our living room to accommodate these things, so those visiting the house can visit Takako in a similar fashion as they did at the funeral parlour, with memorabilia, pictures and all downstairs, and the actual remains upstairs. I asked what should I do when the flowers begin to die and the sister told me, "...call the brother and he will call the funeral parlour, then they will come to replenish the flowers with fresh ones...".

At about 6pm Sun Aug. 1st, the family returned to Chiba, and I slept for over 12 hours. Upon waking Mon. Aug. 2nd, I lit the candle, incense, and rang the bell, then began working on these notes. The first time I finished them, I pressed command P to print, but there was an error and the program crashed before I could print them. After calling some computer savvy friends I realised I had neglected to save them, had lost them, and began on this, the 2nd version, utilising the command S for save very often this time!

In Japan the custom is to mourn or remember Takako by keeping her remains together with the spouse for 49 days after death. It's believed that the spirit lingers in a sort of in-between place for about this period before going to heaven or elsewhere. I think it's assumed that if all these ceremonies and rituals are performed satisfactorily, her place in heaven (instead of elsewhere) is guaranteed, or, that she will be guided properly to the right final place. But of course, having been married by AMMA, and knowing Takako and our love for one another, this is something I am already convinced is true. There is not one shred of doubt in my mind that Takako is, and has been, led to the right place. This 49 day period is also a sort of 'open house', in that any friends or family that want to visit can do so. One of her friends has already said she will bring 4 more of Takako's childhood friends here to pay their last respects, 4 who

were not at the formal ceremony. It is also a time for family to share fond memories, and I suspect family and a few people will stop by and I am grateful.

After the 49 days, the same monk is brought to a burial site chosen by the family and a final ceremony takes place in which the remains are buried in what probably resembles a Western funeral. If need be, the remains will be separated into two containers, one for the family and one for me. This way, if I want to have a private ceremony of my own I can. I had wanted to, but in my mind was to have a picnic with JoJo, Takako, and I, at Takako's favourite Yokohama park, or even back in Singapore where we shared our fondest of times, before spreading her ashes (which is now legal and accepted in Japan). But, that was before I realised I don't have actual 'ashes' per se, but bone fragments! No thank you, I don't want to be seen tossing bone bits around a public place. God forbid JoJo should put one in her mouth and go running off with it, ha ha! JoJo's nose is too good for that I know. Well, I can pulverise the bones with a mortar and pestle, and I have the rest of the 49 days to carefully and considerately think and meditate about what I want to do.

All in all, I think the ceremony and death went off like a charm. Perhaps, in some way, these last few days have made up for the agony of the past. At least, Takako is not suffering anymore. Here are the words I spoke at Takako's cremation ceremony yesterday, forever true and heartfelt:

“ Let me say some things I know about Takako. Takako was probably the only person I've known who was never disliked, never hated or feared by anybody. Most people have someone who dislikes them, at least some of the time. But in the 7 years I knew Takako, she was liked by everybody, even by people who didn't like me! Isn't this a rare thing? I believe there was an innate goodness, purity, and generosity in Takako, that made her popular with all who met her. She used to say that she had no special skill or talent, but yet, she was successful in every job she ever had. I believe this was due to her unique personal qualities, honesty, generosity, forthrightness, and the purity of her heart.

Perhaps some people, maybe even members of her own family, may have thought Takako was not so strong, because of her gentle nature and kindness. But I believe she was very strong. She left her home and family in Japan to travel to Singapore, to live with me, even though at that time, we were not married or even in love. And I made no promises to her at the time. I thought she was really brave to do that. And I had been married once before, for 14 years, and my first wife decided to leave me. So, I was a little mistrustful of women then, and scared to get married again. But Takako was patient and consistent, and in time I came to believe that Takako was the perfect mate and partner for me. When we got married, I told everyone with confidence that I had found the 'right' one this time. After she was diagnosed with cancer she told me tearfully and gratefully, that I had never let her down. Before she died I told her, and I tell all of you now, that she also never let me down either. We were, and are still, fully committed in our love for each other.

Another example of her strength and bravery, was shown to us all in her death, and how she dealt with this dreaded disease for the past year. She told me, "I am not afraid of death, it is nothing"! How many of

us can say that? And how many of us could face what she faced with such dignity and strength? At one point while she was in the hospital, I was suffering at home alone, in pain. A friend said something true to me then. He told me, "Greg, Takako is teaching you a lesson on how to live your life happily." Because, even in her deteriorated physical state, she never failed to greet us with a big smile and greeting when we entered the room. So, what my friend meant was, how can we be sad and feel sorry for ourselves, when a dying, suffering Takako can remain happy? I believe this is Takako's lesson to us all. She was, to me, an example of how we all should be and can be.

I also want to say something about the moment of her death. She wanted me to be there at that moment, and what I feared most of all was that she would die alone in the hospital. We were granted our wish and were together in bed. Just before she died, I said out loud, "Takako, it's just us, you, me, and JoJo here together alone". I told her, "...you ARE the light... accept this knowledge and go with an open heart...". Then her breathing slowed and finally stopped. I believe our dream in life was realized in her death. And I know that she is crying tears of joy and thanks, that all of you are here to say good-bye in such a good way. It is with your help and fond memories that her place in heaven is guaranteed. Thank you!"

Well, that was my spoken tribute at Sunday's ceremony Aug. 1st, 2004. I have already explained what happened next. Now I will take a break from this and hope that in your reading this rather long note, you somehow feel better, or more informed, or closer, or something positive, warm, or gooey. If so, it's partly due to Takako's eternal love and smile that lives in each of us (albeit hidden in some more deeply than in others! ha! ha! ha!)

Greg Chako, Mon. Aug. 2nd, 5:30pm