In this first decade of the twenty-first century, Japan is in the middle of an unprecedented death boom. Beginning around 1980, the death rate started to increase after a period of decline from 1945 to the late 1950s and a flattening out thereafter. From 689,000 deaths in 1979, the number rose to 896,000 in 1996, an increase of about twenty-three percent over seventeen years (Statistics Bureau 1997). The death boom is expected to continue until the year 2020, when it will peak at 1.6 million deaths for a 130 percent increase from 1979 (Matsunami 1996: 98). This annual number of deaths exceeds that of any other year in the twentieth century, except for 1945, when over 2 million Japanese died as a result of World War II and its consequences.

The funeral industry and the Buddhist establishment are well aware of these numbers, and are very active in meeting this growing need. A beehive of activity, funerals are swarming with new developments, and provide a multifaceted mirror reflecting social change. Like weddings, some aspects of funerals now tend toward elaborate productions: altar murals made of thousands of flowers; laser beams glowing through clouds of dry ice vapor; slide, audio and video shows of the life of the deceased; services held at hotels in special halls remodeled to expel incense smoke and to provide separate passageways to keep the newly wedded from running into mourners. No other area of the ritual life of Japan is the scene of so much movement, not to mention the scrutiny it attracts.

The media is paying particular attention to new forms of funerals and burial practices that depart from the traditional Buddhist patterns: internet *hakamairi* 墓参り (grave visitations); scattering of ashes (*sankotsu* 散骨, *shizensō* 自然葬); and nonreligious funerals (*mushūkyō sōshiki* 無宗教葬式) that may feature Bach instead of Buddhism, eulogies instead of incantations, and flower offerings instead of incense. Some scholars, like Suzuki Hikaru (1998), argue that the departure from Buddhist practices represents the death of ancestor veneration, and that household ancestors are being replaced by ‘beloved antecedents’. Eulogies for the
death of the Buddhist funeral, however, are premature, and far from fall-
ing to the wayside, the Buddhist funeral will be riding the crest of the
death boom. Nonreligious forms will certainly increase, but in this bull
market of postmortem services, the major institutional players will realize
huge gains that will greatly exceed the advances of the small investors.

The Buddhist funeral will make modifications to follow trends, but its
appeal will remain rooted in a fundamental, seemingly nonnegotiable
transaction of death: the deceased must be given identities, which require
bodies to possess. The genius of the Buddhist funeral is that it treats a
person’s soul as that person’s body. It guarantees that the soul will not be
reincarnated in another body—that would be the dreaded transmigration
discussed in other religions such as Hinduism—but that the soul will be
born again in the same body. The tragedy of death is the loss of carnality;
the comfort of the funeral is that it restores it through ritual conception.
Re-incarnation is the restitution of carnality.

The carnal understanding of death was exemplified clearly by my
mother, a faithful Jōdoshinshū believer, who nevertheless understood
Buddhism as a religion of amulets and funerals. Uncaring or perhaps
unaware of the official teaching within the denomination that prohibits
the use of omamori お守り, my mother and all of her Jōdoshinshū friends
always carried a number of amulets, which, in addition to the protection
they provided, were emblems of their Buddhist identity. Even more cen-
tral to her practice of Buddhism were the memorial rites for deceased
family members: offerings at the household butsdan 仏壇 altar, temple
services on anniversary death dates, and regular visits to the graves. As she
aged into her late 70s, she became obsessed with saving enough money
to erect a tombstone on the family grave plot so that her ‘eternal home’,
as she called it, would be ready for her. When I suggested to her that she
could spend her money in more pleasurable ways than investing in stone,
she warily asked me what I would do in that case with her remains after
she died. I replied that I would scatter her ashes in the ocean and return
her to nature. She recoiled in horror and said, “But I can’t swim!” Needless
to say, she had her tombstone built. She had a watertight argument: If you
cannot swim now, stay out of the water after you die.

Grave Discussions

If souls could be left in their disembodied state, then discussions about
their final domicile would be vastly simpler than they actually are. But
families entomb persons, not pure souls, and the complexities of personal